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HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2015
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Editor's Notes

IT market intelligence for 2014 & 2015

We have just published our seventh annual report on the state of IT in the UK social housing sector. This report is based on an independent online survey carried out by Housing Technology, using data submitted by senior IT executives from 250+ UK social housing providers.

The outline findings from the Housing Technology 2014/15 market intelligence the report include:

- **Business goals for IT strategies:** better tenant communications and improved levels of tenant satisfaction, combined with a focus on achieving cost efficiencies and value for money, are the main business goals for housing providers' IT strategies.

- **Past two years' IT achievements:** the introduction of or enhancements to mobile working and dynamic job scheduling are the most common achievements by housing providers' IT teams.

- **Next two years' IT goals:** the mobile trend is set to continue apace, comfortably outstripping the consolidation of existing IT systems and the need to channel-shift tenants.

- **Delivery of technology projects' expected benefits:** almost three-quarters of IT projects delivered their expected benefits, with only 12 per cent of IT projects classed as failures.

- **Plans for core applications:** mobile working, housing management and asset management are the most likely applications to be implemented or enhanced within the next two years.

- **Plans for non-core applications:** self-service tools, apps and social media are the most likely technology areas for adoption or enhancements within the next 12-18 months.

- **IT delivery models:** housing providers continue to use their own on-premise IT infrastructures and datacentres; most other external IT delivery models are expected to be used less in the next year.

- **IT budget allocations:** housing providers are spending around 40 per cent of their IT budgets on 'business as usual' and around 42 per cent on the capital and operational costs of new IT projects.

- **IT budget changes:** budgets have increased by around seven per cent in the last year.

The pre-publication report has already been circulated to the report's steering committee of senior IT executives from UK providers as well as to the original survey respondents.

Other housing providers and IT suppliers can now order their copies of the report from **www.housing-technology.com/research/htreport2015.**

FUTURE EVENTS

STOP PRESS – Maggie Philbin to chair Housing Technology 2015 CEO panel
Just before we go to press with this issue of Housing Technology, we have just confirmed that Maggie Philbin, the well-known television presenter and founder/CEO of TeenTech, will be chairing our CEO panel discussion at Housing Technology 2015 next March.

More information on the Housing Technology 2015 CEO panel discussion will be published at www.housing-technology.com shortly.

Istay@home with Aareon: Using technology to help the ageing population

According to the EU's 2012 'Ageing' report, it is estimated that we will see Europe's population of people over 65 increase from 17 per cent to 30 per cent. Clearly, this will present major challenges in terms of both economic, social and health-related issues for all EU countries. This issue is also on the agenda in the UK social housing sector because due to people living longer, care and support needs will increase.

Aareon is the technical partner in the istay@home project. This is a project that aims to investigate how information technology can be used to support elderly and disabled people to stay in their own homes, and face challenges such as isolation, mobility, health and wellbeing, security and independence.

The project consists of nine housing providers, two universities and four technology companies from the UK, France, Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands. Part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund, the istay@home project has been divided into four phases which I will describe below. The project concludes in 2015, and consideration is being given to the commercialisation of the resulting technologies following the pilot phase.

Phase one of the project was an information gathering exercise which involved gathering a list of the challenges that older and disabled tenants face on a daily basis and their views on how they felt technology might be able to help them in their daily lives and mitigate some of those challenges. This phase was carried out with tenants from the participating housing providers. The key issues that they raised were: to remain independent in their homes; and that they felt increasingly isolated from their relatives and their communities.

And it was primarily these issues that drove the technological and practical aspects of the project. It was found that in all participating housing providers, intensive support was required from staff to help the residents overcome their fear of technology devices and the internet in general, and in some cases, relatives and carers were involved in the induction process.

Phase two of the project involved the evaluation of IT solutions which could be used to form a technology platform. However, one interesting aspect of the project was that, at the end of this phase, a catalogue of affordable products was gathered – a core IT platform capable of running on any device, for use by the tenant, which is also capable of linking to a wide variety of assistive products such as communicative scales, blood-pressure monitors, fall-alert watches, lighting and heating controllers, energy monitors and a GPS-based person locating tool.

In all, over 100 suppliers took part in the evaluation phase of the project and a catalogue of products has been defined from this exercise. Also key to this phase was finding IT devices that tenants felt comfortable using, such as tablet PCs, and what infrastructure needs their properties had, such as viable broadband connections.

Phase three of the project involved training tenants in the new technologies, and real-world testing of the IT platform and the product catalogue in tenants' homes. 200 tenants from five countries took part in the testing phase, which lasted for 12 months and concluded in 2014. Each housing provider chose the products that it felt would have the greatest impact on the sample group of tenants. The general finding was a low technical ability within the tenant group, but a high interest in the concept and the products.

The IT platform for istay@home was developed for the pilot by Aareon, and comprises two parts. First, a tenant portal which is delivered to any device via the internet. Optimised to adapt to any screen size, the application requires the tenant to log in and enter their password. Then, a menu enables the tenant to access various services at any time of day or night. Profile information such as their telephone number, email address and other details can be viewed and edited. Any service can be requested from their housing provider via an intuitive menu-based method, including repair requests for their home. Available devices can be shown, requested and then connected via the portal – for example the 'smart' devices shown above – and the portal then facilitates connection and data sharing to and from these devices so, for example,

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

Istay@home with Aareon: Using technology to help the ageing population

Continued from overleaf

if a certain figure is registered by a connected blood pressure monitor, an alert can be sent to a previously-chosen healthcare professional.

What is interesting about the portal is the creation of an exclusive 'social networking' tool, on the basis that the network might be relatives, or residents living in the tenant's block of flats. Residents can then communicate with external contacts or one another by private messaging or video chat, whenever they want, facilitating a community-building approach. Finally, a 'sharing' function enables contacts to share video, image and document files with one another – for example, a tenant could receive photographs from a relative from their holidays without having to use the wider internet which many tenants said they were nervous about using. Interestingly, many tenants not only mastered the

technology but began asking for more functions and submitting ideas for enhancements to the platform.

Also core to the software platform is the cloud-based 'administration' portal which is used by the participating housing providers' staff to create and manage users of the platform, to receive requests for services and repairs (and optionally interface this to their housing management system), and to manage any workflow processes that may be triggered by data received from any connected 'smart' devices in tenants' homes.

Finally, phase four of the project, which finishes in 2015, will be the publication of the refined catalogue of assisted-living products and the software solution to a web portal to make them generally available to the housing sector and tenants throughout the EU. This phase of the project is

currently ongoing, and considerable interest is already being generated from the relevant countries.

On 25 June 2015, the full results of the evaluation phase and an overall assessment of the istay@home project will be given at a conclusion meeting in Brussels. The resulting software and technology catalogue will then be made available for wider consumption.

Paul O'Reilly is a senior consultant at Aareon.

Orchard expands its presence on CCS frameworks

Orchard has expanded its presence on the Crown Commercial Service's (CCS) frameworks, offering more procurement choices for existing and potential customers. Orchard has promoted its software-as-a-service offerings via the GCloud framework since 2012 and can now offer its entire portfolio of housing solutions via the Local Authority Software Applications (LASA) RM1059 framework.

The Crown Commercial Service (CCS) acts on behalf of the Crown to drive savings for taxpayers and improve the quality of commercial and procurement activities.

Its procurement arrangements can be used by central government departments and organisations across the public sector, including housing providers, local government, health, education, notforprofit and devolved administrations.

Orchard receives 'Grand Prix' Dynamo IT award
Farooq Hakim (L), Regional Director for BT, Peter Hunt, Executive Chairman of Orchard, & Charlie Hoult (R), Chairman of Dynamo North East

Orchard Information Systems' executive chairman Peter Hunt won the 'Grand Prix' award at the Dynamo Dynamites 2014 awards event, which was attended by over 300 representatives from the North East's IT sector.

Dynamo promotes the growth of the IT sector in the North East Region. It is supported by a number of local businesses, public sector organisations and academia, as well as some of the largest players in the IT sector, including Accenture, BT and HP.

The award, described in the programme as "an award to the best of the best", was presented to Hunt by Farooq Hakim, BT's regional director for the North East of England.

Peter Hunt, executive chairman, Orchard Information Systems, said, "While I am delighted to have been given this award, I must emphasise that Orchard's success is down to all of the dedicated people who have worked here over the years and to the trust that our customers have shown in us."

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V1 P2P finance solutions at Community Housing

Community Housing Group is implementing purchase-to-pay (P2P) solutions from V1 to improve spend control and procurement process efficiencies across its five subsidiaries. The project is scheduled to go live in December 2014.

V1's archive and purchasing management solutions will integrate with the group's existing Infor SunSystems accounting software and record all financial commitments and expenditure. The solutions will also automate paper-based procurement procedures by enabling the electronic circulation, storage and authorisation of 20,000 purchase invoices and purchase orders each year.

Community Housing's previous P2P processes were hindered by outdated, standalone systems and paper forms. As a consequence, the finance team was unable keep track of its financial commitments which made it difficult to gain an accurate picture of the group's finances and keep on top of budgets.

As part of its decision to upgrade to the latest version of SunSystems, it chose to replace the archiving and workflow solution it had been using for seven years with more modern, integrated technology.

Matthew Simmons, systems administrator for finance, Community Housing Group, said, "We considered five suppliers but V1's solutions stood out as being very easy to use, plus they offered the intuitive workflow and commitment accounting functionality we needed. V1's ability to integrate into SunSystems and its excellent value for money compared to competitors were also key factors."

V1 Purchasing Management will give Community Housing increased visibility of expenditure across all of its cost centres. The web-based system will enable 100 staff, including budget holders and heads of service, to enter draft purchase orders remotely which are then automatically routed to relevant authorisers for approval using workflow, replacing the unnecessary handling of paper.

The V1 system will also enable the group to build approval hierarchies and accurately check expenses against budgets, ensuring greater financial control through real-time insight into all purchasing commitments.

Simmons said, "V1 Purchasing Management will provide us with improved spend visibility and robust controls to prevent unauthorised spending. Being able to see our financial commitments in real-time will greatly assist us with budgetary control and ensure vital funds are maximised to reinforce our services.

"We will also save a great deal of time by accessing all purchasing-related information from a single integrated system. This will help us to answer queries from budget holders and creditors in seconds instead of minutes. We will also gain further efficiencies by removing the need for paper."

Community Housing is now considering the implementation of V1's optical character recognition (OCR) solution, V1 Capture, to further improve its purchase-to-pay efficiency. This solution enables organisations to make significant cost savings by automating the approval of purchase invoices and reduces manual data entry and associated errors.

New Cascade HR & payroll at Liverpool Mutual Homes

Liverpool Mutual Homes has completed the replacement of its ageing HR system and payroll bureau service with a new system from Cascade. The implementation began in February 2014 and went live four months later.

Michelle Griffiths, HR manager, Liverpool Mutual Homes, said, "When I joined two years ago, the HR system was very inflexible and had limited functionality, and third-party software was needed to access the information that the HR wanted in order create meaningful reports.

"Furthermore, inadequate data meant that we could only surmise HR trends and the costs associated with underlying problems such

as sickness absences, and customer service levels were poor, with lengthy call-back periods, often no acknowledgement of the receipt of data and constant last-minute panics."

Griffiths' criteria for the selection of a new HR and payroll service included ease of use, self-service functionality for non-HR staff, flexibility to accommodate varied employment contracts, room for growth and customer support.

LMH chose Cascade to provide a new HR system with additional workflow, self-service, training, online recruitment, timesheets, expenses and auto-enrolment modules, plus a

payroll bureau service. LMH's HR team can now make starter, leaver, salary and post changes themselves, employees can update expenses and overtime applications for managers to authorise, and any variable changes can be sent via Cascade's secure encrypted system, all before each month's payroll cut-off date.

The housing provider is now much more confident about its payroll activities, and the HR department has been transformed, with fewer paper-based notes and manual interventions.

The HR team can accurately and proactively report on data including starters, leavers, agency staff, sickness absences and

costs. They can also make useful suggestions for change to the management team and illustrate the need to implement targeted HR activities that will support the business and save money. HR reporting used to take around three days, with input needed from different team members but now only takes 30 minutes.

LMH's managers now have much better access to relevant HR information. For example, when conducting a return to work interview, they have staff records, relevant documentation and everything else they may need at their fingertips.

Allpay supports payments channel shift

Allpay plans to enhance its current online and mobile payments, providing a complete payment gateway solution for housing providers and other organisations.

The company, which handles more than £4.5 billion per year on behalf of its customers, already processes over 55 million transactions each year across cash, cards and direct debits, and Allpay's mobile payment app for bill payments has already collected more than £80 million for its customers.

For the last 18 months, it has been orchestrating a channel-shift strategy from cash to online and mobile payments to support its customers. As part of its payments gateway offering to be rolled out next year, Allpay plans to integrate with UK acquirers across all card types, offering competitive pricing and enhanced fraud security features. The move is part of the company's strategy to provide a multi-channel offering to customers as new payment methods become more widespread.

Tony Killeen, managing director, Allpay, said, "New technologies are transforming the way we pay and the future looks set to be one of multi-payment options, including contactless, chip and PIN, and online payments, which are continuing to take over from cash and cheques."

Universal credit data sharing will help tenants

Following a consultation by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) around the sharing of universal credit claimant information with housing providers, Allpay has commented on some of the findings from the earlier universal credit pilot projects.

Ross Macmillan, market intelligence consultant, Allpay, said, "By enabling the DWP to share up-to-date information on who has applied for, or is in receipt of, universal credit, housing providers can channel resources better towards supporting tenants. The findings from the government's Direct Payment Demonstration Projects during 2012/13 demonstrated that where the direct payment of housing benefit had been implemented, housing providers saw that the contact that they had with tenants rose considerably as a direct result of the additional support that was needed."

The pilot project also showed that tenants often lacked an understanding of the different financial products. Macmillan said, "The projects highlighted a lack of awareness and understanding of financial products among tenants, due to a high proportion of them preferring to budget and pay bills with cash. We often assume a ubiquitous understanding of banking products and services, such as the difference between a direct debit and a debit card, but that isn't always the case among lower socio-economic groups.

"Supporting the programme with increased payment choice is vital, and part of that is about housing providers making their existing payment channels as clear, simple and attractive to their tenants as possible. While the pilot projects showed that direct debit will not necessarily suit everybody's circumstances, they did show that where flexibility is offered in terms of frequency, collection date and ease of set up, more tenants are willing to sign up and manage future payments.

"Direct debit collection dates can be set up soon after tenants receive their universal credit, thus giving the tenant confidence that they have enough in their account to cover their rent. The sharing of universal credit claimant data will aid this process, reduce the risk of arrears for housing providers and mitigate the risk of residents incurring unpaid transaction charges."

ThreeSixty Connections analytics & data management from Coactiva

Coactiva has launched a new data management and analytics solution to help housing providers maximise income, increase efficiencies and reduce fraud.

Coactiva's ThreeSixty Connections solution incorporates all of Coactiva's fraud and revenue assurance solutions in one platform to give users a single view of each tenant, enabling a better approach to data matching and consolidation.

Users will have access to all the data required to create actionable intelligence through modules focusing on specific areas of housing administration, including revenues and benefits, corporate debt, business rates and fraud.

Delivered as a web-based service, ThreeSixty Connections will enable users to integrate their own in-house data with Callcredit (Coactiva's parent company) credit reference data, as well as matching data, recording and reporting on campaign outcomes and establishing and accurately forecasting a number of critical performance metrics.

James Rawlins, senior consultant, Coactiva, said, "Whether it's reviewing single person discounts, consolidating debtor records, maximising business rates revenues or performing a tenancy audit, ThreeSixty Connections will make it much easier for the public sector to maximise income and stop more fraud."

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FRS 102 – Are you ready?

Karen Conneely, Group Commercial Manager, Real Asset Management.

In the November 2013 issue of Housing Technology, Karen Conneely, the group commercial manager for Real Asset Management wrote about how being ready for the new FRS 102 regulations would dictate the need for a proactive and comprehensive programme of preparation. But as the deadline grows ever nearer, are you ready?

So, let's do a quick recap. What is FRS 102?

FRS 102, which will officially come into force in March 2015, is based on the international financial reporting standards for SMEs but has been amended for the UK market. It will change the way accounts are currently prepared under UK GAAP and prompt an overhaul of the format of financial statements and the disclosures required. Moreover, it will change the recognition criteria for various assets and liabilities, which in turn will affect how some items are measured. It will have implications for the treatment of certain gains and losses compared with the current methodology.

For housing providers, it will mean a difference in how they report historic costs and grants. In particular, FRS 102 aims to reduce the balance sheet to a point where it only shows the true value of its properties, with the grant slowly released over time.

Under the new guidelines, grants will be treated in one of two ways. Primarily, under an accrual method (for those accounting at cost), grants will be classified as capital or revenue, with capital grants recognised as income over the economic life of the building and revenue grants recognised as cost. Alternatively, under the performance method (for those accounting at valuation) grants will be taken as income when performance criteria specified in the grant conditions are met. Extra work will be created at the forthcoming year-end, where additional reporting will be required to compare values from SORP 2010 to SORP 2014.

So if you haven't already started, now is the time to prepare for the move; by March 2015 it will be too late. Follow the easy steps below to get ready for FRS 102 ahead of time and the transition will be smooth and stress free.

- **Ditch the spreadsheet –** Housing providers that are currently reliant on spreadsheets or rigid in-house systems may not be able to handle these requirements as easily or effectively. Spreadsheets generally provide insufficient reporting or audit capability. Similarly, in-house systems are often inflexible and give organisations no ability to model or reclassify assets as things change.
- **Be flexible –** You can prepare by ensuring your accounting systems are flexible in how they handle data. They will need to be agile enough to allow them to treat the accrual of grants differently, enabling them to be released over longer periods of time.
- **Ask for advice –** A specialist partner will not only be able to deliver practical tools that can help save time and provide immediate visibility of real-time accounting implications, but they will also be able to play an important role as a strategic advisor with sector-specific knowledge and experience.

Karen Conneely is the group commercial manager for Real Asset Management.

Clearview business intelligence for Cadwyn

Cadwyn Housing Association is the latest housing provider to turn to Clearview business intelligence and reporting to unlock their data to drive service improvement programmes. The Clearview implementation was completed in September 2014.

Adrian Jones, IT manager, Cadwyn Housing Association, said, "We are in the early days of our implementation of Clearview, but we have already identified data issues and discovered where we can improve the consistency of our data-entry processes. We can now view our data in a way that wasn't possible before and we have empowered our users with access to more information without the need of IT support or the knowledge of database table structures and SQL skills.

"The possibilities regarding linking our Capita housing management system with some of our other systems and comparing past data with current data is exciting and a challenge to how creative we can be."

Mark Hobart, managing director, Clearview, said, "Our search engine approach to business intelligence and reporting breaks down the traditional technical barriers and empowers staff to engage with data from a variety of sources in ways that truly support their service improvement initiatives. With just a few days' training, Cadwyn staff are already self-sufficient in their use of the product and identifying areas for service improvement."

Paper cuts that won't hurt

John Sant, CEO of mobile working specialist Footprint Solutions, explains how housing providers can benefit from moving their processes online to drive efficiencies, cut costs and improve tenant relationships.

We are all using more services online; in the same way that you can read the newspaper or organise finances on the internet, tenants increasingly expect the same kind of service from their housing provider. While some tasks can be done online, there is still some way to go before all services, as well as key internal processes within the housing sector, are completely digitised.

What benefits will housing providers gain if they embrace the channel shift? A report by the Policy Exchange estimated that the public sector could save up to £70 billion by 2020 if services were available online rather than being paper-based. Despite this, and the overwhelming benefits of moving to digital, a startling number of housing providers continue to rely on paper-based processing, which is ineffective, time consuming and a drain on finances.

Stop chasing paper planes
Going paperless isn't just about reducing the amount of money we spend on stationery. The problem with paper is that it perpetuates the creation of information silos. Because the information captured in paper documents does not lend itself to sharing, activities can often be duplicated.

Not only does paper create fragmented pools of information, it also requires an extraordinary amount of physical storage space which comes at a premium. Maintaining an ever-growing set of paper files and archives takes up time and valuable resources.

Housing providers need to comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, and in particular its fifth principle concerning, 'personal information is not to be kept for longer than is necessary for the purpose for which it is processed'. In many cases, this could mean documents are stored for up to six years, and if you consider the volume of paperwork that housing providers process every day, they would need a significant amount of space to store all that information.

Forward-thinking housing providers want to transform how they communicate with tenants to ensure they deliver the right services to the right individual across the right channel. It stands to reason that if a housing provider is 100 per cent digitally-enabled internally, they shouldn't be sending paper forms to residents to complete.

Benefitting from the channel shift
There are a number of reasons why housing providers should embrace the inevitable shift from paper to digital. While some may consider moving services online as a laborious task, the outcome certainly outweighs the input, with the potential to improve efficiency, deliver cost savings and reduce the burden on already stretched resources.

Paperless processing enables more effective remote working by allowing staff to maximise their time in the community, using mobile applications to access back-office information on the frontline. By doing so, staff can engage with residents in their own homes, improving levels of engagement to reduce payment defaults and manage issues and needs more efficiently.

Digital services also create an open channel to share information across a housing provider's different departments, limiting the need to circulate paperwork or encounter duplication. Crucially, online services present a money-saving opportunity; by simply reducing the amount of printing alone, housing providers could save up to £20,000 per year.

Learning from others: Golden Gates Housing Trust
In 2012, Golden Gates Housing Trust conducted a thorough review of its services, driven by the need to achieve value for money and deal with the impact of the government's welfare reforms. As part of this review, Golden Gates reorganised its frontline services to complement its ongoing work on digital inclusion and improve the quality of its face-to-face interactions with tenants.

Golden Gates wanted an IT system that would maximise the amount of time in the field and reduce paperwork. After recognising an opportunity to radically transform the way they do business on the frontline, Golden Gates implemented Footprint's Housing Support Pro mobile working software.

Since implementing the software, the Golden Gates has improved service levels and response times and enabled better field-based working, including payment collections. Housing Support Pro has also reduced duplication of effort through intelligent data capture and simplified end users' tasks.

In terms of financial benefits, Golden Gates realised £500,000 in capital savings through the reduced office space required by a mobile workforce and cut paperwork by 47 per cent. It has also improved productivity by 29 per cent, increased cash collections by six per cent and delivered £250,000 in efficiency savings.

And looking at those saving another way, if Golden Gates continues to realise the same cost savings over the next 30 years, it will be able to build 300 new homes.

Digital by default
Regardless of whether UK citizens are online or offline, housing providers cannot ignore the opportunities of going digital. A more intelligent approach to collecting, managing and sharing data, both within and between departments, will enable housing providers to create a much more efficient experience for residents and reduce costs.

The digital roadmap should be in the DNA of decision making and, in order to move the paperless society from concept to reality, housing providers need to embrace the revolution and stop chasing paper planes.

John Sant is the CEO of Footprint Solutions.

North Lanarkshire's 20% productivity boost with Kirona

Following the first phase of the introduction of Kirona's mobile working and dynamic job scheduling software to technical officers and tradespersons across its housing service, North Lanarkshire Council has seen a 20 per cent increase in the productivity of its local homes teams. It has also achieved cashable savings in the region of £280,000 per year from reduced asset and administration overheads.

The second phase of the introduction of Kirona's Job Manager and Xmbrace DRS will see the system and supporting mobile technologies deployed across all of the council's capital, voids, planned and repair works categories.

Des Murray, head of housing property, North Lanarkshire Council, said, "Our vision for this project has been to remove the service bottlenecks that have traditionally hampered our performance both in the office and in the field.

"Since implementing the software, our repairs teams and our customers have seen a significant improvement in our services. Our no-access rates in areas such as pre-inspection have dropped from 40 per cent to just 3 per cent, with turnaround timescales counted in hours not days."

Kirona's workforce management software was chosen because it manages everything from the scheduling of jobs in the office using Xmbrace DRS, through to the fulfilment of the work by field operatives using the Job Manager mobile application. The same technologies are now being used to integrate with other systems, including the council's asset and contracts management frameworks and its wider mobile working infrastructure.

Murray said, "We are just as excited about the future as we are about what we've already achieved. We are now beginning the process of rolling out the framework we have developed beyond housing services, including the incorporation of over 1,200 personnel from our home support teams."

Footprint lone worker protection at Golden Gates Housing Trust

Footprint Solutions is providing lone workers at Golden Gates Housing Trust with an enhanced personal safety suite to safeguard them while working in the field. The implementation began in January 2014 and was completed by May, and was reported to have cost less than £100,000.

Golden Gates is the first housing provider to trial Footprint's Protect module, developed in partnership with Guardian24, which allows them to integrate Footprint's Housing Support Pro (HSP) solution and Guardian24's personal security service onto tablets and smartphones.

Housing Support Pro assigns job appointments to each user, and when the user accepts the appointment, a corresponding Guardian24 lone worker activity record is created. The user can then log an estimated time for them to complete the appointment. If they overrun, the smartphone will call them to verify their safety; if they do not respond, an alert will be triggered

which then follows the customer's predefined escalation procedures.

If the worker thinks that they are in danger, they can raise a covert panic alert which is picked up by either an incident management centre, or a specific contact as defined by the escalation procedures.

Peter Fitzhenry, director of housing management, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said, "We recognise that lone workers have to deal with potentially difficult situations. By using the Protect module, we can offer enhanced protection for our staff, while also recognising the operational benefits of using the Housing Support Pro solution."

Footprint & Guardian24 partner for lone worker safety
Guardian24 and Footprint Solutions have set up a partnership to address the problem of lone worker safety. Guardian24's lone worker solution has been integrated with Footprint's

Housing Support Pro workflow solution, a tablet-based mobile and paperless working application for remote workers.

John Sant, CEO, Footprint Solutions, said, "This integration is a perfect fit for housing providers that need to bring lone worker solutions to their mobile workforce. It means that workers are protected from a duty of care perspective, and housing providers ultimately benefit from having a comprehensive package of solutions on one device."

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1st Touch mobilises A2Dominion for welfare reform
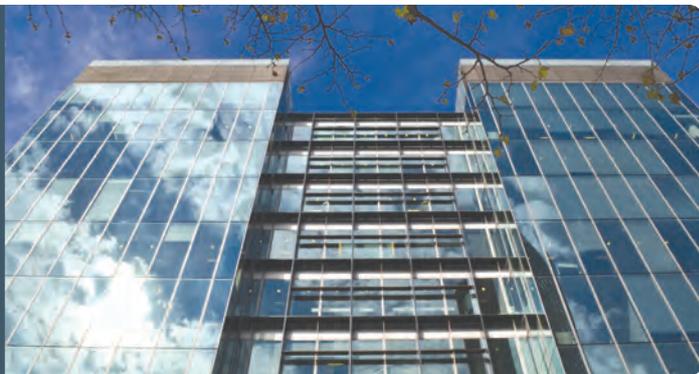
A2Dominion has chosen 1st Touch mobile software to support its income collection teams while also helping tenants understand and adjust to welfare reform changes.

Following the introduction of welfare reforms, A2Dominion decided that it needed to implement new proactive processes that could support the collection of income from tenants at the same time as helping those who might face difficulties adapting to changes to the benefits system. The new strategy involved boosting personal engagement between its income officers and tenants using mobile working.

A2Dominion chose 1st Touch's mobile software, mainly because it was platform-neutral and allowed the use of Android devices. 1st Touch was also capable of ensuring that over 70 income officers would have all the information and forms they needed at their fingertips when visiting tenants, including benefit calculators and data on transactions, balances and payments.

A2Dominion's Civica housing management system now raises an arrears file as an action in its back-office CRM system and in turn this sends it to 1st Touch. This information is then forwarded to the relevant income officer's mobile device with all the information relating to that case.

In addition to increasing the amount of rent collected, it is expected that the new system will allow income officers to increase the time spent on visits to help tenants. Other anticipated benefits include savings on fuel, print and stationery costs.

Trevor Whittaker, head of business systems, A2Dominion, said, "Following the introduction of welfare reform, we needed new management processes that would not only improve income collections but also enable us to

explain the changes to our tenants in person. To do this we needed a mobile solution capable of supporting these two objectives and 1st Touch ticked all the boxes."

Looking to the future, A2Dominion is planning to expand its use of mobile technology into supporting estate inspections and tenancy management.

1st Touch mobile app helps AmicusHorizon gain £1.7m extra income for tenants

AmicusHorizon has lowered arrears and raised over £1.7m of additional income for tenants by integrating its existing CRM system with a financial inclusion app supplied by 1st Touch.

Jeanette Alfano, Director of Technology, AmicusHorizon

AmicusHorizon wanted a mobile app that would not only support financial inclusion processes in the field, but could also help secure more income for its tenants. 1st Touch was chosen to supply the mobile software and by integrating it with AmicusHorizon's existing CRM solution, financial inclusion officers now have all the relevant information they need to help the tenants that they are visiting.

Jeanette Alfano, director of technology, AmicusHorizon, said, "What tenants wanted was for us to know who they were when they called us. 1st Touch is our mobile solution and it allows us to take our knowledge of our tenants to their door. The

combination of welfare reform, our CRM development and 1st Touch mobile allows us to provide a really strong offering for our tenants.

"It enables us to identify which of our tenants might struggle, and being able to discuss this in their home makes a big difference to them. Through the steps we've taken, we've managed things successfully for our tenants before they have become a problem."

Financial inclusion cases created in the CRM system are written into Microsoft Outlook as appointments. 1st Touch then polls Outlook for the appointment and then brings it into 1st Touch with all the specific case and relevant background information required. Once with the residents, the financial inclusion officers can then identify possible areas of help. This might include reviewing training opportunities for those keen to return to work or identifying unclaimed benefits.

With the app in place, each financial inclusion officer is now completing two more visits per day and the quality of visits is higher, resulting in greater tenant satisfaction. AmicusHorizon has also reported a reduction in arrears and extra income raised for tenants.

Robert Stewart, business systems manager, AmicusHorizon, said, "With the financial inclusion app in place, the most interesting figure of all is that we have managed to secure £1.7m of additional income for our tenants to help them through the challenges of welfare reform. The app has also helped us to reduce our arrears to just over three per cent."

AmicusHorizon is now aiming to create 'one view of a property' dashboards, combining repairs history along with inspections and property history in one place.

Arcon texts with Omniledger

Arcon Housing Association is using Omniledger's Pyramid Messenger to automate communications with its tenants using text messaging and workflow. Since the introduction of the new system in December 2013, the housing provider reported that it was saving around £4,000 each year as it no longer needs to send letters for rent arrears, waiting list renewals, repair surveys and other generic notifications, in addition to the significant amount of time saved by staff using the automated workflow.

Anne Southern, finance director, Arcon Housing Association, said, "Arcon has been a long time user of OmniLedger's Pyramid housing management system and having seen a text messaging solution work successfully for another housing provider, we decided to bring some of that success to our own organisation with Pyramid Messenger, which is powered by the Deeplake engine.

"Our staff instantly saw the benefits of being able to send batch notifications, removing the need to prepare and send letters, which obviously saves time, but we have also seen a dramatic increase in responses from our tenants."

Gary Dempsey, account manager, OmniLedger, said: "Numerous studies have shown that people are more responsive to text messages than letters. Pyramid Messenger takes advantage of this and enables housing providers to communicate with their tenants via intelligent text. Another benefit has been the deployment of the intuitive workflow designer, where business processes can be adapted into an automated procedure to provide information to tenants in their preferred language."

NDL mobile working accelerates annual repairs at North Hertfordshire Homes

North Hertfordshire Homes has saved 100s of hours of back-office time and reduced by two months the surveying period for its annual repairs programme by introducing mobile working. Its building surveyors are now using NDL's AWI MX mobile working toolkit on iPads when they inspect properties, eliminating paper forms and enabling the automatic transfer of reports to its housing management system.

NHH's planned repairs are carried out based on the age of a property, such as re-roofing and re-wiring. In addition, every seven years all properties on specific estates are individually inspected and assessed for other repairs on items such as chimneys, gutters, paths, driveways and brickwork. Any work identified is then scheduled to be carried out the following year. At any time, one seventh of its property portfolio is undergoing a bespoke maintenance programme, with another seventh being surveyed for repairs for the following year.

Previously, when NHH's surveyors visited properties, they used multiple printed forms for the specific repairs needed, with 500 different types of entries possible covering task, trade required, quantity, location, unit of measurement and miscellaneous extra works. This information was later manually inputted into a spreadsheet by one of NHH's administrative team, double-checked by a surveyor and corrected if necessary, and then transferred to the housing management system.

NHH selected AWI MX, NDL's mobile working toolkit and corporate platform, to automate the property inspection forms. The toolkit enables users to design, deploy and manage multiple bespoke and secure mobile applications across different types of devices. Using these applications, mobile workers can operate on or offline, taking information from back-office systems with them and updating it from the field.

Indy Bhogal, the NHH software business analyst who developed the mobile app, said "It's really important to understand the surveyors' processes and how you can mimic these so they don't have to learn something completely new. As a consequence, we got the app right from the start rather than having to go through lots of iterations, which meant they really wanted to use it."

The app enables surveyors to enter all aspects of the necessary repairs, working either on- or offline, and then up- and download data to and from the housing management system.

Steve Foulds, NHH's building technician closely involved in the development of the app, said, "As well as streamlining how we enter the data, the new system gives us real-time information on the properties we're inspecting when we arrive. It's a clean, seamless and accurate way of working. But also managers can get realistic overviews immediately of what is going on."

Mobile pay-as-you-go rental savings with Allpay

After a nine-month pilot with several housing providers, Allpay has launched a new pay-as-you-go mobile service, Allpay Mobile, so that tenants can save towards their rent by topping up via their mobile phones.

The payment specialist teamed up with ET Telecomm for the scheme, which offers tenants call rates below major UK operators' rates and a 10 per cent loyalty bonus towards their rent account for every top-up. This means that if a user tops up £10, they get the full £10 worth of phone credit and a further £1 off their rent account. Furthermore, all members of a household can have their 10 per cent loyalty bonus added to the same rent account.

In order to encourage take-up, tenants can keep their existing handsets and numbers and simply sign up online once their housing provider or local authority has signed up for the scheme. They can then top up in cash on the high street or by phone or online, and manage their account themselves.

Tony Killeen, managing director, Allpay, said, "Through Allpay Mobile, tenants can boost their rent accounts without changing their behaviour, meaning they have less money to find for their rent and their landlord has less rent to collect.

"The scheme is very complementary to the services Allpay already provides. Not only do we now provide the widest range of ways for tenants to pay their bills, but a way for them to save towards them too."

Severn Vale improves 'first-time fixes' with Orchard

Orchard has completed an audit of how Severn Vale Housing is using its Orchard housing management system, particularly around improving avoidable customer contacts and encouraging tenants to use self-service channels. The audit also laid the foundations for mobile working and improved CRM, workflow and EDM to increase the number of 'first-time fix' resolutions.

Severn Vale Housing asked Orchard to look at how the current system and user experience could be improved and how they could move from the old GUI system to the new browser-based Orchard Housing software. Severn Vale also visited other Orchard customer sites to see how they were using Orchard Housing and how they approached ownership of the system.

Modular audits were carried out by Orchard across all of Severn Vale's business areas to review current practices and ensure that the latest module enhancements had been adopted, that the modules were being used correctly and that best use was being made of the available functionality. This resulted in greater efficiencies in the use of Orchard Housing across the business, a successful transition from the GUI version of Orchard Housing to the browser version and a greatly improved user experience.

Tim Knight, chief executive, Severn Vale Housing Society, said, "Our engagement with Orchard has helped to influence our strategic direction and ensure that strong foundations have been laid for the further development of technology solutions, which are focused on efficiency and improving the services to our customers."

Orchard Housing's integral CRM capability has now been rolled out across the housing management, customer services, housing development and repairs management teams for all in- and outbound contacts.

Front-line support with Axonex and Enghouse Interactive

With the introduction of welfare reforms, most housing providers are reporting an increase in queries from tenants wanting to know how the changes will affect them, adding to the workloads of customer service teams.

Axonex has reported on how more than 40 housing providers in the UK are using Enghouse Interactive's technology to stream, prioritise and resolve tenants' queries during the first point of contact. One customer, Devon and Cornwall Housing Group, said, "We can communicate flexibly with our tenants using their preferred channel, which can now also include email and SMS. This new system is amazing – it's a business-changing piece of kit."

In order to reduce the impact of welfare reform and universal credit on front-line services, Axonex has suggested a four-point plan:

- **Offer personalised services –** Make sure that tenants' calls are directed to the person they spoke to previously, and if your lines are busy, offer a call-back option to reduce tenant effort and frustration.

- **Connect with tenants their way –** Give them the widest possible choice of communications channels, and consider profiling tenants and use this to tailor the services you offer, for example directing elderly callers to team members with better listening skills.

- **Keep your agents informed –** Make sure that when tenants contact you, your agents have the right information at their fingertips, such as 'screenpops' to flag any outstanding actions or concerns. As Bron Afon Housing said, "Having information on tenants displayed directly on the screen is vital in communicating with them and resolving queries quickly."

- **Tracking and performance –** Track your tenants' requests and record calls so they can be used for staff training and improve services as well as resolve customer disputes. And by measuring call length, how quickly the call was answered, and how well each agent is performing can help to make informed decisions in real time. As reported by Richmond Housing Partnership, "Having the call centre gave us that ability to track performance and to deliver a better and more joined up service to our customers."

Trident develops app with Panda Media

Trident has launched a mobile app that enables tenants to pay their rent, and report repairs and anti-social behaviour (with the added facility to upload photos), all from the convenience of their iPhone or Android smartphone. In addition, Trident staff can also use the same app to report local issues when they are out and about, ensuring that they will be reported via the correct channels.

Having been trialled by other housing providers, the original app was supplied by Panda Media and then customised to Trident's requirements. Panda also provided additional plug-ins, on the understanding that other housing providers may want to opt in, with the costs and knowledge base being shared.

Ed Reed, head of ICT, Trident Social Investment Group, said, "The app is another easy way for our residents to gain access to our services. The app has been developed specifically around housing providers, in direct response to their needs. The result is simplicity and ease of use, with direct access for residents to key services when they need them."

Clearview data mapping & reporting at Victory Housing

Earlier this year, Clearview completed a comprehensive data mapping and reporting project at Victory Housing Trust, including the implementation of its business intelligence and reporting suite of software. The aim of the project was to improve the speed, transparency and accuracy of Victory's corporate and operational reporting to support service improvements and achieve 'top 10 per cent' tenant satisfaction levels.

Hugh Unwin, head of customer support, Victory Housing Trust, said, "We decided to embark on this project with Clearview in order to achieve the two main parts of our corporate plan. The first was to deliver timely and accurate performance reporting to enable service improvements, and the second was to reduce our reporting overheads and give managers and staff the reporting data they need."

Victory's business reports were previously created in-house by taking data from a wide variety of disparate sources, including external systems. The compilation and consolidation of the various data sets was mostly done by hand and not widely-understood, making it slow and prone to errors. The housing provider therefore decided to work with Clearview to create a suite of automated, reliable and dynamic operational dashboards.

The first stage of the project involved finding out the expectations and needs of Victory's heads of services, including any new data to be included in the dashboards. Part of the challenge for Clearview was to investigate and validate the information being displayed in the reports, including talking to the members of staff who produced the current reports to find out what data was already being captured and how it was being processed.

Hugh Unwin, Head of Customer Support, Victory Housing Trust

The second stage was to find a way of producing a range of reports that were not only easy to understand and interpret correctly, but were also rigorous from a data capture and analysis point of view. It was also important that the relevant members of staff could immediately access the underlying data used in the reports so that any anomalies could be explained, corrected or acted on as soon as possible.

In some cases, this meant mapping the process of how the data was captured to ensure that the right data was being recorded and sometimes, more importantly, understanding the frequency of the data capture. This process mapping then enabled Victory to decide whether to invest time, energy and effort in either changing how the data was captured or accepting the current process and the limitations that it would put on its reporting.

Extensive work was then carried out by Clearview to tune, reconfigure and align Victory's data sources. This enabled the automation of its corporate KPIs and resulted in the creation of a number of new operational reports.

Unwin said, "Overall, this project has improved the quality and availability of our reporting while reducing our production overheads, giving everyone a dynamic and comprehensive view of service performance. This means we can intervene before service thresholds are reached and base our service planning and forecasting on higher quality information."

Housing 'Tinder' from Viridian

Viridian Housing has reached the final round of innovation charity Nesta's 'Housing Open Data Challenge' with its 'Housing Tinder' app. Inspired by the US dating app Tinder, which connects mobile users with the Facebook profiles of likely romantic partners within a given radius, Viridian's app is intended to make it easier for tenants to arrange mutual exchanges.

Nesta teamed up with the Open Data Institute to launch an open data challenge (using information that's publically available), focused on the theme of housing. It posed the question: 'How can we use open data to help people get the best out of renting?'

Following an intensive 'Creation Weekend' in September, where selected teams had the chance to work with developers to build and test early mock-ups of their ideas, Housing Tinder was made a finalist and awarded £5,000 plus expert support

to develop the idea and build an early-stage version of the app. The winner of Nesta's £40,000 grand prize will be announced in December.

Ed Wallace, Research & Innovation Manager, Viridian Housing

Once fully developed, 'Housing Tinder' will make it easier for tenants wanting to swap their rented property to find more suitable accommodation in areas they want to live. The app will give tenants the option to search for properties and get in touch with people about potential moves, all

through a few taps on their mobile phone.

Ed Wallace, Research & Innovation Manager, Viridian Housing, said, "We knew from the work we're doing to speed up housing transfers that some websites offering home swaps for social housing tenants aren't particularly accessible or user friendly, that people generally don't want to move far, and that even the early stages of helping someone consider a move can take up a lot of time and resources.

"We wanted to develop a service that would take away all the hassle for our tenants and literally hand them all the information and convenience they need to find the move that's right for them. The hard work starts here and we would be interested in talking to other housing providers about the idea to make sure it's right not only for our tenants, but theirs as well."

Master data management for Wheatley with VisionWare

Wheatley Group has completed the implementation of a new CRM and master data management infrastructure that gives it a single view of each of its tenants across its four operating companies (including Glasgow Housing Association) and its external partners. Based on VisionWare's MultiVue system, the housing group can now ensure that all of its disparate application siloes contain the latest and most accurate data. Wheatley's front-line and customer

service staff use multiple platforms and applications to access tenant information; each system was bought or developed for a specific purpose and was not originally intended to be part of an integrated information strategy. Before the implementation of MultiVue, the individual systems didn't share a single means of identifying a tenant, making it difficult to track an individual from one system to another.

Therefore, in response to the challenge of unlocking the value of its disparate information assets, Wheatley selected VisionWare's MultiVue system for customer data

integration (CDI). Wheatley also engaged with The Improvement Service for Scottish local government to gain access to the Scottish National Citizen Identifier (UCRN) in order to extend its master data management strategy with its external partners.

Wheatley uses MultiVue to identify the same tenant within a system, or across a number of different systems, so that its staff can manage the process of updating all systems so they contain the latest and most accurate view of a record, including data from the group's factoring and housing management systems.

Wheatley now has access to the full historical picture of tenants across its systems in preparation for 'singe view' CRM, with data anomalies flagged to end users, allowing the right decisions to be made. Wheatley plans to add further systems to MultiVue in the near future and regards MultiVue as being at the centre of its business processes.

Don't build websites – Build digital services

Harry Metcalfe, Managing Director, DXW

Harry Metcalfe, managing director of digital services provider DXW, writes on what it takes to build a true digital service that puts users at its heart.

It's 2014, and the world is ending. The internet's ability to transform the way society works is clear, and examples of transformational services are all around us. It's no longer possible for companies to stand still; people expect more. And they have more outlets to express their displeasure when they don't receive it. The status quo just won't do.

This challenge is not unique to housing. It's an issue that everyone's grappling with; how do we deliver exemplary services in a rapidly-changing world, against a background of increasing information risk and pressures to save money?

Most organisations have responded as best they can. Lengthy strategies have been proposed, projects have been delivered, money has been spent. But the underlying approach has tended to rely on big design up-front, tight specifications and rigid processes, which have been shown - comprehensively - not to deliver. The systems that are born of this model are generally bad: expensive, fragile, inflexible and incapable of delivering good user experiences.

This is not necessarily the fault of individuals or organisations. Housing is full of talented people, doing their best to make life better for tenants, often having to solve complex social problems along the way. But the complexity of technology is of a fundamentally different nature, and requires a complete rethink.

So, if we're going to make a break from the past, we have some hard questions to ask:

- Is it possible for existing systems to deliver the user experience to which we all aspire?
- How can we delight and amaze our tenants with the usefulness and convenience of the next generation of digital services when we're integrating with 'ancient' IT?
- Can our organisations, as currently conceived, build and support the services that tenants want?

If we're to set our sights higher, we need a new mindset. We need to focus, unrelentingly, on the needs of our tenants. And we must allow those needs to shape our organisations, our teams, our assumptions, our thinking and our services.

We have to adapt the way we work. Our culture and values must be user-centric, and our technological approach needs to be flexible. We have to embrace the reality that any technology-based decision we make now will be obsolete within a few years and plan for that change. Spending on these systems is certainly an investment, but in many ways, it's more sensible to think of it as an operational expense.

Digital services don't function in isolation, so they can't be built in isolation. A tenant's repair doesn't begin when they log in to report it and end when they press 'submit'. It starts when they notice the leaky tap, and ends when the tap's been fixed to their satisfaction. A digital service may play a vital role, but it's not the whole picture. And, if the tap doesn't get fixed, the tenant will be dissatisfied, even if the online reporting transaction was world-beating.

Redesigning services so that the user experience is radically improved will involve every part of your organisation. Effectively supporting the services that your tenants really want will probably require the shape of your organisation to change.

Against that background, it's clear that we can't just make digital versions of paper forms and stick them on the internet with a logo at the top. Your digital services should be the fully integrated, constantly evolving, effort-saving, user-delighting culmination of everything you want to do for your tenants, online and off.

So how do we do it?

Most fundamentally, we need to talk to tenants. This isn't just the province of your tenant engagement teams. Everyone in your organisation needs to understand who your tenants are and what they need; understand their frustrations, their challenges and the things that will delight or infuriate them. And remember that the whole of their interaction with your organisation is in scope, and that exceeding their expectations is everyone's responsibility.

Whenever you're facing an implementation decision, refer to your tenants. We need to test everything we build with tenants to ensure that it really works. If you can't get any insights from tenants, don't let that hold you up and just make the decision, but make sure you also do something that will give you the answers you need the next time you're considering a problem.

When you find that your tenants are pushing you in a direction that appears impossible, don't give up. Question your assumptions, be bold and do the hard work to make things simple.

Change on this scale is a huge challenge so don't try to do it all at once. Make a small team of bright, energetic, curious people and give

Don't build websites - Build digital services

them a problem to solve. Don't make an IT or marketing team solely responsible for the work. Those specialisms are important, but they're only two of the many you'll need. A multidisciplinary team is necessary.

Try to find a problem that's annoying but not too big, and solve it. Don't rush, but don't take your time. Momentum is important, and quick progress will prove the approach and galvanise support. The strategy is delivery: the Government Digital Service took GOV.UK from its alpha stage to a live service using just those four words to define their approach. The strategy is delivery.

When you've delivered something, figure out what the next thing is, and start working on that. Throughout, revisit the decisions you've made so far. When things need to change, change them. Everything should be open to constructive challenge and debate, and nothing is ever finished.

If you're going to work in this style, making frequent small improvements in a rapidly-changing environment, you'll also have to manage your technology the right way. If your systems are hard to change, they'll be a real blocker to your progress.

It's important to have the right kind of governance. One of the principles of this approach is 'people over process'. Process is important, but governance works better in person. Whoever is responsible for the work should be hands-on, visible and available to help remove obstacles to progress. Prioritise timely in-person communications over written reports. Manage risks pragmatically, and throughout the project: don't risk-manage at the start and risk-assure at the end. Do a little bit of both throughout the whole process.

The real challenges that face us are not technological. They are human. Ingrained bureaucracy, unquestioned

assumptions, doubt, fear of failure, cynicism and the often-complex circumstances of our tenants are the things we need to tackle.

Over time, you'll find that a tenant-focused team with freedom to innovate will cause a new breed of startlingly good services to emerge. The majority of your digital spending should be on good people who can take on these challenges and solve them, not on technology. Embrace open source, open standards and open working. You will be amazed at how much better you can make things, compared with how little you spend.

A bright and exciting future is ahead of the housing sector: it has so much potential. It has the independence and the means to be world-leading. It's yours for the taking.

Harry Metcalfe is the managing director of DXW.

MPLSystems launches IntelligentResponse
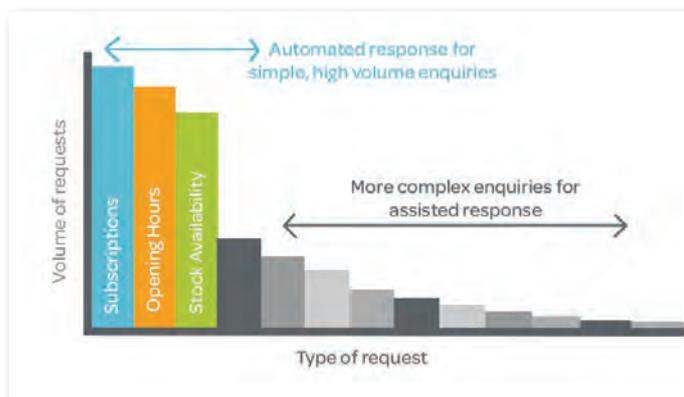
MPLSystems has launched IntelligentResponse to help housing providers handle the increasing volume of incoming messages from the growth in web chats, social media, mobile apps and email. The software supports the blending of automated and assisted responses, resulting in up to 60 per cent of messages being handled automatically.

IntelligentResponse uses text analytics technologies to filter out standard, high-volume requests, such as council tax queries, waste and recycling queries, change of address details, and service update requests, so that they can be dealt with using standard, automated responses. At the same time, more complex enquiries can be routed to contact-centre agents with the most appropriate skills for resolution.

Paul White, CEO, MPLSystems, said, "Until now there's been a reluctance among housing providers to open themselves up to direct messages from channels such as social media, mobile apps and web chat because they've often found it hard enough to keep up with handling emails from their tenants.

"While text-based channels such as email, web chat and social media now account for around 15 per cent of inbound interactions, their growth has been inhibited by a lack of responsiveness and the disproportionately high cost of processing them."

Available either as a standalone system or as an additional service for existing users of MPLSystems' IntelligentContact multi-channel contact centre technology, IntelligentResponse enables contact teams to handle higher volumes of tenant enquiries without increasing staffing levels and spend more time responding to more complex tenant enquiries.

White said, "A large proportion of tenant interactions are primarily concerned with relatively routine requests. With IntelligentResponse, we can help them automate the processing of around six out of ten of these standard text-based interactions. Many tenants would much prefer to conduct these types of interactions by email, web chat or SMS, rather that navigate through a self-service IVR or queue for an agent."

Derby Homes opts for Clearview's customer engagement suite

Paul Cole, Customer Engagement Officer, Derby Homes

Derby Homes has deployed Clearview's customer engagement suite of software. Paul Cole, Derby Homes' customer engagement officer, explains the thinking behind the decision to implement Clearview and the challenges faced by the resident involvement team.

What are your resident involvement challenges?

As a result of a council review of housing services in 2013, resident involvement was identified as a key service area that needed refreshing because 'genuine tenant involvement is modest and needs revitalising'. Involvement was seen as being limited to a few tenants who attended the 'city' board and the tenant federation meetings. Engagement across the organisation appeared to only involve a few individuals who were not representative of the wider body of tenants.

Since the review, the resident involvement team of seven has been restructured and is now implementing a new customer engagement strategy. A large part of this involves a change in culture from relying on regular meetings, in favour of being more proactive, mobile and engaging with tenants in their homes and communities.

Previously, outside our regular 'housing focus groups', no real engagement data was collected, so we weren't in a good position to understand what activities were going on across the organisation. As a result, it was hard to deliver a truly measurable service, let alone gather reports with any degree of accuracy.

These changes have also improved the relationship between internal teams and have given us a new challenge in co-ordinating the amount of information this type of engagement generates.

How are you capturing tenant engagement data to deliver a more holistic view of tenant interaction and experience?

We know there's a lot more going on if you scratch below the surface. We're now working a lot closer with many more staff. Our new strategy means everything has to be funnelled through us, so we can ensure consistency and quality. We've never before been in a position where we've been able to learn from data for the bigger picture, so it's a really exciting time.

Why Clearview?

After some initial research, we went through a full tendering process, based on a specification we drew up from a 'wish list' of things we'd like to be able to do. Going through the tendering process, Clearview's submission was the best match for our specification and we felt that the responses were thorough, honest and reassuring.

We aim to have a system that provides us with a means to deliver, plan and monitor all engagement within Derby Homes. This will range from recording attendance at board meetings, tenant panel activities, capturing feedback, delivering surveys and tracking volunteer contributions.

We will be testing the software to its limits and will assess its potential for things like our new doorstep consultations. This will require mobile working using tablets and phones and face-to-face delivery of consultations in a variety of locations across the city.

We're also keen to get to grips with the reporting, to create dashboards for multiple users and provide real-time information on hand to plan our future work and report back to Derby City Council.

Abritas launches 'swapandmove' online service

A new service from Abritas to help tenants to swap their homes went live in October. Tenants can now register on

www.swapandmove.co.uk to advertise their home for swapping with another tenant. They can then search for suitable swaps and contact other tenants to arrange a mutual exchange.

Swapandmove helps tenants to exchange their homes both locally and nationally. Rather than waiting on a transfer list, tenants can now search for the right home for them. Mutual exchange can be a much quicker way of finding a new home, and is becoming increasingly popular for both tenants and housing providers. It enables housing providers to increase their range of housing options, while giving tenants access to a wider selection of properties.

This system interfaces with the government's Home Swap Direct scheme, further enhancing tenants' chances of finding a suitable swap. Housing providers can subscribe to the service and then provide access for all of their tenants at no further cost.

Building an award-winning website at Paragon Community Housing
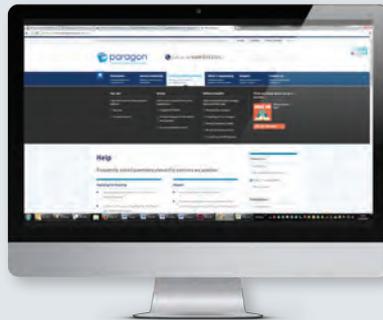
Paragon Community Housing Group has recently won the 2014 National Housing award for Best Digital Marketing for achievements that are centred on its new website. Hannah Elford, Paragon's design and communications manager, explains how they are making the first steps on a digital journey.

We needed to revitalise our online presence and expand our digital services to offer choice around how tenants engage with us. We wanted to push more content online and understand how we could design content that was flexible for print and the web. It was important to understand how we could motivate users to get online, and consider what their user journeys might be.

The site was built by digital agency White October, who worked closely with us throughout the whole process. They spent a lot of time finding out what we do and how we work, helping us to set objectives based on what our tenants really wanted from the website, even if it meant challenging us. Their objective was in line with ours; to make sure every single page on the site served a clear, agreed purpose.

We knew a good proportion of tenants were not 'web-savvy', so if we were going to build a new website, we had to ensure people could get what they needed from it without having to search around. This meant user testing. White October were passionate about getting our tenants on board and facilitating the testing.

Now the site is live, we can tackle the digital challenges around encouraging tenants to get online and use the internet to interact with us, and to try new methods such as text messaging. Rather than just creating content, we're beginning to understand how we might shape services that were previously delivered offline.

As the universal credit system is taking time to come to fruition, it's a fantastic opportunity for housing providers to explore digital. The process of designing the website was iterative and continues to develop. This is a valuable approach as it proves that small changes in the right direction can speed progress. They can also avoid inaction, which is common in the sector and stems from a pressing 'get it right first time' mentality.

We continue to test the site with users as part of its ongoing development. We use Google Analytics, perform mystery shopping exercises and have a trained panel of Resident Inspectors who have recently carried out a Scrutiny Inspection of our communications.

We're getting very positive feedback and here are a few recent comments:
• "Excellent! Type in 'ASB' and there is simply everything one needs to know. I searched for my TSO and it was very clear. I feel your website is really outstanding."
• "The website was very easy to navigate, and the spaces were all highlighted and easy to fill in. It is a well-designed website."
• "I'm pleased tenants were asked to help look at how the website worked and what we thought about it before it went live. When I saw the new website for the first time, I was glad they listened to feedback about using a clear typeface."

Site traffic has increased 30 per cent since the new site was launched, and I'd suggest that it's not only more popular with tenants, it's helped to give our staff new self-belief too.

We've made an excellent start to our digital journey with a site that enables us to evolve and develop. The National Housing Awards judges summed it up pretty well when they "found the website easy, smooth to use, creatively good-looking and intuitive."

We are integrating mobile marketing such as text messaging into everyday communications with our tenants. We also use mobile marketing to enhance our marketing campaigns and drive website traffic.

As we continue to expand digital services, and strive not to leave any of our tenants behind, we are considering creating an online tenants panel who can provide feedback and act as a sounding board for how we move services forward.

Digital services are not standing still, they are evolving. And as such we need constant feedback and an iterative approach.

Paragon Community Housing Group has recently won the 2014 National Housing award for Best Digital Marketing for achievements that are centred on its new website.

Hannah Elford is the design and communications manager at Paragon Community Housing Group.

Civica web services & digital inclusion at Longhurst

Longhurst Group's senior project manager for business improvement, Gavin Black, reports on their experiences as one of the first users of Civica's web services to create a bespoke tenant portal.

Gavin Black, Senior Project Manager for Business Improvement, Longhurst Group

The sector is awash with tales of welfare reform and tenant support, and barely a meeting goes by where value for money isn't identified as a key measurable. So developing a tenant portal that allows our tenants to manage their tenancies online while reducing the man-hours required to make that possible is like the quest for the Holy Grail.

Our three stock-holding member companies launched My Account to their tenants earlier this year and have been delighted with the feedback received so far. The secure platform offers tenants instant access to rent balances, personal information and their entire tenancy history. Longhurst Group is a federal organisation which means that although all three companies collaborated to develop the product, each has a distinct identity that needs to be upheld throughout the portal. So we needed to find a solution that would work without limiting creativity or functionality.

The answer we came up with was to use secure web services provided by Civica to act as the technical connection between our databases and our websites, and enlist a second vendor to deliver our web design. This allows us complete flexibility when it comes to the look and feel of the website without any implication of reduced functionality. This has also enabled us to ensure that My Account is fully functional on all devices because it has been developed alongside our mobile-enabled, responsive sites.

The efficiency of integrating our websites with our own in-house transactional systems has not only allowed our tenants instant, live access to their own data, but has almost eliminated the need for any human intervention in order to provide that data.

Security was a fundamental element of the project and providing a secure connection required both of our vendors to work closely with us and each other to achieve a watertight system. The secure system we have in place has laid the foundations for further developments designed to integrate with our CRM system.

Gavin Black is the senior project manager for business improvement at the Longhurst Group.

BT launches dedicated DI service for housing

Housing providers can now offer cost-effective internet connections and devices to their tenants, with the launch of a new shared internet service from BT Business. The service delivers an internet connection, which could include shared access between residents to reduce monthly rental costs, and an affordable device, as well as training and support for tenants.

The introduction of the DI service follows BT's work with the Wheatley Group (parent to Glasgow Housing Association) and the Scottish Government to offer affordable wi-fi access to over 100 households in one of GHA's multi-story properties.

The initiative won 'ICT Connect Award 2014 – Connecting Citizens', and used Archos 97 Tablets and Samsung Google Chromebooks to give 138 homes access to high speed wi-fi throughout the building, linking back into the main BT network via a single BTnet connection.

As a result of the scheme, two-thirds of tenants are actively seeking employment online, with four per cent finding jobs in the first six months of the pilot project. A third of tenants also reported that they had saved money as a result of internet access, with 65 per cent saving more than £100.

BT supplies the service to the housing provider, rather than individual tenants, so that the housing provider can choose the best option for each facility – whether that's charging on a per unit basis or making wi-fi available in communal areas, in the case of care homes. As a result, tenants can get easy access to the internet without having to worry about things like credit checks, and many housing providers are expected to include installation costs in their pricing.

Graham Sutherland, CEO, BT Business, said, "With over four million tenants in social housing having never used the internet, we are working with housing providers to help those on low incomes or who are unemployed, elderly or disabled gain access to the internet."

Richard Troote, head of ICT, Wales & West Housing, said, "There are a number of drivers for us to provide internet at home to our residents, including the forthcoming implementation of universal credit, which means people have to be online or at least have access to the internet.

"There are also a number of barriers that, until now, have prevented many residents from having broadband at home. Working with BT Business has allowed us to go a long way towards eliminating those barriers, so that we can provide cost-effective internet access, as well as the training and technical support our tenants need."

Launch of the Connected Housing Initiative for DI

A group of 12 housing providers (representing 400,000 households), the Greater London Authority and Digital Unite are collaborating to combat digital exclusion. The Connected Housing Initiative aims to highlight the 1.8 million social housing residents who are digitally excluded.

The 12 housing providers estimate that over 110,000 of their own tenants are unable to access the internet due to a lack of skills or accessible kit and connectivity. Over the past decade they have spent over a million pounds on providing digital training for their tenants, but even if tenants have the skills to go online, many are still priced out of the market.

Connected Housing Initiative's goal is to ensure more affordable, sustainable and accessible IT kit and connectivity for all tenants. The group is offering 25 years of expertise and experience to help emerging and existing IT companies access this market and work with them so everyone living in social housing can access the internet wherever they live, whatever their income.

Munira Mirza, deputy mayor for culture and youth, Greater London Authority, said, "Our Smart London Plan is all about ensuring that new technologies can really help improve Londoners' lives. We want all Londoners to have the confidence and know-how to get online and benefit from all the incredible opportunities that the internet has to offer. Campaigns like the Connected Housing Initiative bring together internet providers with housing providers to get more people online."

Helen Rowe, chair of the Connected Housing Initiative at Viridian Housing, said, "Many housing providers are investing heavily in supporting their tenants to learn how to use the internet, but we simply can't provide internet access to 1.8 million people. We want our residents to have genuine choice in the market.

"For IT companies wanting to offer affordable kit and connectivity to social housing residents, we can be their route into this market and we are offering our support and expertise to any companies who would like it."

Helen Rowe, Viridian Housing

The housing providers involved in the initiative are: Affinity Sutton, AmicusHorizon, Family Mosaic, Hanover Housing Association, L&Q, North Hertfordshire Homes, Orbit Group, Peabody, Southern Housing Group, Sovereign Housing Association, The Hyde Group, and Viridian Housing.

According to members of the Connected Housing Initiative, 40 per cent of housing providers plan to negotiate affordable internet connectivity deals in the next year to support their residents, and over 80 per cent plan to deliver communal premises with internet connections and computers in the next year.

£53,000 DI project from L&Q

L&Q has launched a year-long digital inclusion programme for 150 of its residents. L&Q's 'Digital 400' (D400) programme is being funded by a £53,000 grant from the L&Q Foundation and will be delivered with training provider Silver Training.

D400 will initially offer 150 residents without computer skills bespoke IT training as well as free equipment and a year's internet access to help improve their access to online services, money saving sites and employment-enhancing computer skills.

An internal survey in 2013 showed that digital exclusion was an important issue for L&Q tenants, with almost 40 per cent of the 2,200 respondents having no access to the internet and 46 per cent of these being in receipt of some form of benefits, which must often be renewed and can easily be done online.

Mark Rowe, financial inclusion project officer, L&Q, said, "Our digital inclusion project was set up to help residents use online services in the wake of the government's 'digital by default' strategy, which will see most government transaction services, including applying for universal credit, move online during 2015."

A graduate of last year's D300 course at L&Q said, "I thoroughly enjoyed the course and would definitely say to people who have not worked with computers not to be scared. Whatever your age take the leap and join a computer course. It opens so many doors!"

The D400 course will be held in local community buildings or L&Q offices, with two-and-a-half-hour sessions once a week for a month. The course will cover basic computer skills, online shopping, online benefit claims and job searches and applications. There is also the option to gain a City & Guilds entry level 3 IT skills accreditation. Travel expenses, a potential barrier to learning, will be covered with a £5 daily allowance.

Once they have completed the course, tenants will be given help to set up an internet connection at home, a USB dongle providing 12 months of free internet access and a recycled PC with Windows 7 and Microsoft Office.

Integrated digital strategies and digital inclusion

As the government puts more and more of its essential services online, many housing providers are recognising that tenants don't just want access to the internet, they need it.

While digital inclusion poses many challenges to housing providers, it also offers many opportunities in terms of increasing efficiency through channel shifting, improving customer service, and boosting workforce efficiency and productivity. However, this means that housing providers must consider digital inclusion as part of their overall digital strategy – not in isolation.

Taking a lead from the private sector

Today, most of us shop online at least some of the time and many of us pay our bills online and use other online services on a regular basis. This hasn't happened by accident. For the past ten years, major retailers, energy companies and others have had a deliberate strategy to 'channel shift' us away from interacting face-to-face or over the phone towards interacting via the internet. They've made it safe, easy, more convenient and very often less expensive to shop and use other services online. This has achieved huge cost saving benefits for these companies, but the majority of customers have gained a better service too.

At the moment, many housing providers operate large contact centres that process a variety of tenant questions and queries. Very often, contact centre staff become engaged in lengthy and costly phone calls that could be dealt with far more effectively and efficiently if they could communicate online. However, many tenants can't do this because they're not online and those who are might not always get the quick response they're looking for or expect when their housing provider asks them to get in touch via Facebook, Twitter or email.

Cost vs. benefit

There's no denying that channel shifting is going to cost money. At first, this will mean spending money on streamlining back-office services so that any processes being moved online, such as fault reporting, are robust and fit for purpose. Housing providers will need to look at the skills of their contact centre staff. Managing a 'blended queue' of inbound requests, via text, social media, web chat and phone, is a real skill and will require an investment in training and staff support. Many will also need to review their contact centre processes and response time, putting service level agreements in place to ensure customers get the responses they expect.

Natasha Clough, Head of Business Development for Social Housing and Digital Inclusion, BT Business

Additionally, they'll need to invest in the latest contact centre technology and look at how tenants experience and navigate their web pages. The user 'journey' through a site is now all-important and must integrate closely with its customer contact strategy. For example, a website must clearly set out where and how a tenant can pay a bill, report a fault or make an enquiry, and that tenant must know that their query is being dealt with. However, all of these challenges have been met by the private sector and are today leading to considerable efficiencies. Housing providers and their tenants can, and should, benefit too.

Workforce management

Wi-fi enabling a building doesn't just benefit the tenants, it can have huge knock-on advantages for the housing provider itself. Regardless of where a housing provider chooses to procure it from, with wi-fi comes efficiency.

At BT, the work of our telecoms engineers is portioned out over wi-fi wherever they are in the country; this prevents unnecessary travel and makes them far more efficient. Housing providers are no different, as they often employ large mobile maintenance workforces that look after properties over wide areas. If those teams can be made more efficient through effective workforce management solutions delivered over wi-fi then the housing provider receives better value from these teams.

Additionally, if a maintenance engineer has access to wi-fi they can do more when they're on site. They can download report forms or take payments in real time. Staff can take tenant signatures immediately and load them up to a central system – all this would make them far more streamlined and efficient.

Where to start?

I know that many housing providers want to help with the government's push towards digital inclusion and are aware of the huge benefits to tenants. I also know that many are considering the advantages of channel shifting and want to increase the productivity of their remote workforces.

However, savings though channel shifting will never be fully realised if tenants are not online and if web pages do not give the tenant an effective user experience.

An all-singing, all-dancing website will not work alone without an effective contact centre backing it up and users will not be pushed to communicate via Twitter, Facebook and email if they are not responded to within a time that they consider acceptable. Additionally, workforces will not be as efficient as they could be if they don't have easy access to wi-fi.

All these factors are inter-related, but anything is possible, and the starting point for me is to have an integrated digital strategy.

Natasha Clough is head of business development for social housing and digital inclusion at BT Business.
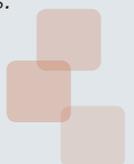
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IT infrastructure trends in housing

Housing Technology interviewed experts from Castle Computer Services, JMC IT and Waterstons on their views of how housing providers' IT infrastructures are likely to change over the next few years and also to predict the 'next big thing' for new technologies.

Key IT infrastructure trends

Enabling seamless mobile working and, as a closely-related area, the ubiquitous availability of housing and tenant data, regardless of time or location, are the most significant IT infrastructure trends, followed by the ongoing focus on value for money and productivity gains.

Andrew Cruickshank, director of technical sales, Castle Computer Services, said, "Housing providers are looking at how they can mobilise their workforce, not just pockets, but potentially the entire organisation, for example by adopting a hot-desk policy. One of our housing customers conducted an audit of its premises; the audit showed that its offices were running at 60 per cent utilisation.

With the introduction of desktop virtualisation (VDI), this allowed our customer to rationalise the buildings that were needed and sell the rest. As a result, they gained a significant amount of income that they wouldn't have been able to achieve without the adoption of VDI technology.

"I'm also frequently asked about cost per desktop per annum or cost per user per month, demonstrating that there has been a fundamental shift in people's mind-sets towards looking at utility-based IT services.

"Our experience is that organisations want to offload their IT infrastructure in terms of the day-to-day management in order to allow IT teams to focus on strategic projects."

Commenting on the blurring of the distinction between in-house and

"Housing providers are looking at how they can mobilise their workforce, not just pockets, but potentially the entire organisation, for example by adopting a hot-desk policy. One of our housing customers conducted an audit of its premises which showed that its offices were running at just 60 per cent utilisation."

Andrew Cruickshank, Director of Technical Sales, Castle Computer Services

cloud IT infrastructures, in particular for mobile working, Mark Summers, head of technology sales and housing specialist at JMC IT, said, "IT infrastructure trends reflect the need to have the right solution available wherever and whenever required to provide effective tenant services. We've moved beyond simply deciding whether to install on-premise or cloud-based solutions; we can now use a single, interoperable platform with Microsoft Windows Server, Office 365 and Azure. This is a real 'game-changer' that will give housing providers the flexibility needed to communicate effectively, enable full scalability and drive efficiency throughout their organisations."

Alistair McLeod, director, Waterstons, said, "With value for money high on the agenda of the regulator and housing providers' boards, the emphasis for IT investment and management is to lower the total cost of ownership while delivering high quality outcomes, as seen by the adoption of virtualisation technologies, cloud-based services and the implementation of IT service management processes.

"There is also a cultural revolution, with the idea of remote and mobile working becoming much more widely-accepted than before, with the goal of reducing time spent in the office for field workers and more flexibility for back office staff. This means that the IT infrastructure, and more

importantly control of data security, goes beyond the realms of the firewall, so IT departments may not have the same level of control as before, and they will need to be more creative in how they remotely manage devices and facilitate BYOD."

Drivers for change

The issues determining housing providers' adoption of new IT infrastructures are uniformly about delivering business value through a combination of lower costs of ownership, value for money and productivity improvements.

Watersons' McLeod said, "Housing providers need to become more competitive as funding is reduced, which means they need to deliver IT infrastructures that are low cost, resilient and robust but yet can adapt and scale to meet changing business needs. The technology does exist to deliver this agenda and the IT director of the future needs to be much better at orchestrating IT architectures that are better aligned to the business requirements and flexible enough to change, without compromising security." The need for housing providers to make it easier for their staff to share data was highlighted by JMC

"We no longer need to take a 'big bang' approach through high capex investment in IT to prepare for the future. Instead, we can implement solutions now that can then adapt and scale both up and down in line with providers' changing needs."

Mark Summers, Head of Technology Sales & Housing Specialist, JMC IT

IT's Summers, who said, "Housing providers can be more innovative in the way they drive efficiencies within their organisations. One key area is making better use of shared data, for example with Microsoft SharePoint and OneDrive to collaborate on documents

IT infrastructure trends in housing

Continued from opposite page

regardless of what device is being used. Using Azure and Office 365 allows organisations to scale out for advanced data interrogation and, instead of dealing with issues around IT infrastructures, they can focus more time and effort on providing better services to tenants."

Cruickshank from Castle Computer Services said, "The key drivers are cost efficiencies and best value. It's ensuring that every penny invested in the infrastructure can be demonstrable in the sense that there is a pay back over the period that drives efficiency for the business to allow investment in the next set of technologies that are coming to the market in the next 3-5 years.

"It's important to note that the deciding factor for any VDI solution deployed is the mission-critical applications used within business. For example, if the IT supplier will not support a VDI technology, then the chances are that the project will fail as the support statements will not be robust enough for the IT director, finance director or chief executive to introduce that level of risk into the organisation."

Social housing vs. other sectors

IT infrastructure drivers and trends in housing are generally thought to be the same as other public-sector organisations, such as government services and local authorities, but they lag behind commercial organisations in the private sector. This is partly to do with the underlying culture of most public-sector organisations, but mainly to do with private-sector organisations' constant demand for business growth, profits and shareholder value through cost-savings, productivity gains and competitive differentiation.

Waterstons' McLeod said, "The trends in remote and mobile working are similar to other public and regulated sectors who are also waking up to the benefits of flexible working as funding is reduced and investments are scrutinised. However, the smaller housing providers are still behind the curve compared with a lot of private-sector organisations, such as telecoms and utilities, professional services and manufacturing, although they are comparable to the construction sector,

"Housing providers need to become more competitive as funding is reduced, which means they need to deliver IT infrastructures that are low cost, resilient and robust but yet can scale to meet changing business needs. The IT director of the future needs to be much better at orchestrating IT architectures that are better aligned to the business requirements and flexible enough to change, without compromising security."

Alistair McLeod, Director, Waterstons

which has always been slow to adopt new technologies.

"In terms of value for money and total cost of ownership, this has always been scrutinised more in the private sector where the pursuit of shareholder interests means financial performance comes in for more review. However, many housing providers are thinking more strategically about IT investments and trying to align their IT infrastructures better to business requirements."

Cruickshank from Castle Computer Services said, "I don't think that these trends differ too much from other sectors. The traditional lifecycle of infrastructure was 3-4 years, but this has been extended to potentially 5-7 years, demonstrating that organisations are 'sweating their assets' longer to ensure they get the best pay back from that investment.

"We are seeing a shift towards the centralisation of data and infrastructure management, where the management of many more end-points can be done from a central console so that updates and patches can be done far faster and more efficiently than before."

The next big thing

The IT sector is frequently guilty of 'over-egging' the future or making misplaced predictions of the next big thing. In terms of new IT infrastructures, the future focus for most housing providers is less about new 'bells and whistles' and more about using new technologies, such as cloud services, to make better use of their existing IT infrastructures and information repositories.

Cruickshank from Castle Computer Services said, "Our experience is that

some organisations are reluctant to put their data in the hands of another organisation but they are prepared to allow their infrastructure to be managed by a third party. Importantly, their data will reside on-premise at their offices, under their control, so in the event of a problem with that provider, their IP is protected.

"Device proliferation is also a big issue, as organisations need to be very conscious of data stewardship and leakage. I anticipate that if mobile technologies are not deployed properly with the right levels of security and authentication processes, there may be some challenges ahead in terms of data leakage."

JMC IT's Mark Summers said, "We no longer need to take a 'big bang' approach through high capex investment in IT to prepare for the future. Instead, we can implement solutions now that can then adapt and scale both up and down in line with providers' changing needs."

Alistair McLeod from Waterstons said, "IT integration is still a major challenge, especially as digital information is on the increase and the way we store and consume it is constantly changing, and the ability to search across the enterprise and make connections between the data you have is still problematic.

"The cloud is an obvious growth area and it is beginning to mature, with the belated realisation that off-premise, cloud-based solutions are not a 'silver bullet'. More organisations are beginning to appreciate the value of cloud services and I think we will see a better balance struck between on-premise services and supporting cloud-based services. Software-defined networking, or network virtualisation, is also starting to emerge, which reduces the need for physical network hardware and therefore playing to the hands of the low total cost of ownership agenda."

Housing Technology would like to thank Andrew Cruickshank (Castle Computer Services), Mark Summers (JMC IT) and Alistair McLeod (Waterstons) for their time in contributing to this article.

Interview: Data centre services in housing

Kevin Kivlochan, Sales & Marketing Director, ONI

Housing Technology interviewed Kevin Kivlochan, sales and marketing director of ONI, on how housing providers could use data centre services.

Why should housing providers look at data centres?

At a time of ever-growing reliance on IT, all housing providers need internal and external systems to be reliable, scalable and, most importantly, secure.

Long before universal credit, most housing providers were looking at ways to offer more choice for tenants to interact with their landlord and self-serve. The advantages to this are not just transactional cost savings. Transactions online can improve tenant satisfaction by enabling tenants to interact at a time which is convenient to them and in a location which suits them best.

In addition, ONI is seeing many housing providers transform the way their staff operate. Introducing flexible and mobile working solutions is reducing complexity and risk as well as producing significant cost savings and improvements in tenant and staff satisfaction.

These demands for evolving digital services to be highly available and cost effective are encouraging many housing providers to look at external data centres to house and securely maintain their core IT systems and applications.

What should they look for when choosing a data centre?

When selecting a data centre partner, it is essential that organisations look past the data halls and flashy marketing materials. Clearly, it is essential that the data centre provider can guarantee service availability; however, we are seeing clients looking for a partnership with a provider who has the expertise, experience and a flexibility to support their transformational journey wherever this may lead.

It is also important to ensure you visit the facility to ensure it's on UK shores and to confirm that the resilience, infrastructure and security are as the marketing material has outlined. Particular attention should be focused on the following key areas – generators and UPS systems, power distribution, cooling, fire prevention and suppression, connectivity, diverse routing to racks, and security processes.

ONI would also suggest that time is taken to consider commercial matters such as flexible contracts and simple, open pricing structures.

One additional point is to understand the ownership of the facility. Many data centre operators either lease space in another provider's facility or lease a building to provide their data centre services. In both arrangements, landlords or owners may invoke changes which could have implications for the supply of services and cause changes and disruptions to your service. ONI's recommendation is that you fully understand the terms of your supplier's lease so you can consider if this is a risk you are willing to accept.

Can you explain the spectrum of data centre options?

There are several models that can exist; ONI see the following which we can accommodate:

- **DIY –** organisations who want to build their own facility and manage this process in-house or via contractors. However, it is widely recognised that building a reliable and highly-available data centre needs considerable investment in both time and money, hence the reason why many organisations are turning to providers like ONI who have already made this investment and can share the costs across multiple organisations, resulting in a lower cost of ownership for our housing customers.

- **Co-location –** This is typically when an organisation has already made an investment in equipment and infrastructure and requires a secure, reliable and highly-available facility to house their investment. In a typical co-location arrangement, the data centre provider is responsible for the racks, space, power and cooling and to ensure the site and facility are secure for clients who are responsible for the systems within the racks provided.

- **Managed co-location –** This is a hybrid of the above; in this model, the data centre provider will take on additional support for the equipment within the racks. ONI is well placed to deliver this service, which many data centre providers don't offer, due to our data centre being on the same campus as our technical assistance centre and engineering hub.

- **XaaS –** These are a range of 'as-a-service' or cloud services built on platforms that the data centre provider has already built and can offer as a service to its clients. Once again, not all data centre providers offer these services. ONI offers a range of services including infrastructure-as-a-service, backup-as-a-service and DR-as-a-service, providing clients with a range of fully-managed propositions to run applications and services from.

What are the business advantages of using a data centre? And the IT advantages?

The business advantages of using an external data centre are focused around lower cost of ownership, reduced risk and higher availability for critical tenant- and employee-facing systems.

Interview - Data centre services in housing

Housing providers don't need to incur costs for buildings or maintaining a data centre internally and can also scale up and down as required. In contrast, by keeping the data centre internally, provision must made for the largest deployment from day one and may result in costly space under-utilisation.

For IT, the benefits associated with reliability ensures that IT can focus on delivering services to tenants and staff, safe in the knowledge that the data centre will always be available and not subject to power outages that can cause significant work-loads to bring services back online.

With the growth of cloud services such as infrastructure-as-a-service (IaaS), both IT and the business can respond in minutes rather than months. Data centre providers can set up servers in minutes and allow new services to be tested or demand to be met without the usual delays of onsite purchases. Then once the demand, service or pilot is complete, simply turn off the server and stop paying for it.

Are there any common misconceptions about data centres?

Data centres are one of the last bastions of 'smoke and mirrors'. After 22 years as an IT service provider, ONI decided when building our data centre in 2010 to remove the smoke screen and start from a blank sheet of paper.

The biggest misconception I see about data centres is the tiering system. The guidelines for what makes a data centre tier 1, 2, 3 or 4 are exactly that, a guideline. We position our data centre as tier 3+ because ONI meets all of the requirements for tier 3 and almost all of the requirements for tier 4, but the important thing to understand is that data centres are self-classified, so we always encourage our prospective clients to visit our facility to see for themselves the significant investment ONI has made for our clients.

Another common misconception is that all services are the same. I recently attended an event where an IT director talked about the maze of hidden charges and terms and conditions associated with a data centre provider's services. At ONI, we have decided to build our services in a transparent and simple way. We believe that we are an extension of our clients' IT service and therefore have to deliver services in a flexible and open manner. So again, chose a partner that is right for your organisation and will deliver the services you would expect as if it were your own.

Railway Housing heads for the cloud with Civica

Railway Housing Association has reported that it has cut its IT costs by 30 per cent since it moved its infrastructure to a fully-managed cloud service from Civica.

Railway Housing's relationship with Civica dates back to 2001; at that time, it was technologically stuck in the past and required new systems that could help run its business more efficiently while delivering better tenant services.

Implementing new systems and deploying them to multiple offices, some of which were tiny, would have created a huge cost burden. The company would have had to buy and house new hardware, license and install the applications, create a wide area network to allow remote access, and manage, support and upgrade all of this on an ongoing basis. With no IT staff in place, that would also have meant hiring a small team of IT professionals.

Railway Housing knew that it would make more sense to partner with a managed services provider rather than build its own modern infrastructure from scratch. Since the main system it had chosen to license was Civica's suite of housing applications, it moved its IT infrastructure to Civica on a managed service basis.

Stuart Bradon, finance and ICT manager, Railway Housing Association, said, "Over the years we have developed a great partnership with Civica but we're also pragmatic – if someone else was offering the same service at a lower price, we would go for it. In the end, Civica came out on top commercially, and it also has a great insight into our business."

After having completed the migration to Civica's hosted service, Railway Housing then commissioned an independent consultant to carry out a cost comparison between Civica's outsourced cloud service and bringing it back in-house.

Bradon said, "When we saw the results, it was a very easy decision. The consultancy found that by outsourcing our environment to Civica, we had saved around 30 per cent of the cost of managing the same infrastructure in-house.

"Civica has enabled us to focus on our core business. We have the modern systems we need without having to employ an IT team – and as we plan future enhancements and upgrades we know the infrastructure and services are there to support them. That's one less thing to worry about."

Making sense of big data

Sir – One of the hottest topics in technology over the past few years has undoubtedly been big data. This is essentially any data-set large and complex enough that it becomes difficult to process using traditional applications. The key question is: how can housing providers benefit from big data, and avoid it becoming a problem?

In simple terms, big data should not be seen as a problem. We now have the technology to store and process large quantities of data without spending a fortune. So the question is more one of how housing providers, who collect huge amounts of information on their tenants, can use big data to their advantage.

Storing large amounts of data is in itself pointless unless you can do something useful with it. The key is to analyse the data and use the results to inform business decisions. One of the early lessons in software product development is not to guess at product design but to seek feedback from clients, analyse the data and use this to make informed decisions. This principle works in all areas of business and big data gives us the mechanism to deliver this functionality without huge costs.

The first step for most housing providers is to extract their existing data from the multitude of data siloes it sits in and put it into a single, central 'big data repository'. There will be immediate business benefits in analysing the existing data to gain insights, such as the groupings of vacant properties, the groupings of the least attractive properties by area and the characteristics of tenants with rent arrears.

The next step is to layer in extra data from additional sources such as tenant credit histories and flood-plain locations that will enhance the analytics. Over time, the volumes of data will increase and it will become possible to add time-series analysis to provide further insights. For example, looking at the percentage void decrease over the last 12, 24 or 36 months.

The effects of big data on some areas of industry have been profound. Leading retailers have been able to attribute sales increases of 10+ per cent to the insights that they have gleaned from analysing their customer data. It will be interesting to see how the housing sector can leverage this new technology to improve service and save costs over the next few years.

Paul Creamer
Chief Technology Officer, Housing Partners

Please submit your response to any of these letters or your own letter by sending an email to *news@housing-technology.com.*

Are housing providers losing their appetite to develop?

Sir – At the time of writing (early August 2014), the Homes and Communities Agency had just allocated more than half of its £1.7 billion grant funding for the 2015-2018 affordable homes programme and it's clear that some of the biggest landlords are shrinking their bids by between a half and two-thirds of their previous programmes.

This is not good news for either the 1.7 million households currently waiting to be housed or the country as a whole.

Already some providers have warned that the grant rates were too low and the conditions too onerous to justify bidding, and pointed to the replacement of social rents with higher affordable rents combined with the welfare cuts as being unsustainable. Indeed, many landlords in the North of the country warned that low grant rates did not make sense economically in an area where low market rents mean lower affordable rents.

It was hoped that the government's 10-year rent settlement would provide sufficient stability, but it seems this has been undermined by landlords' unwillingness to raise rents to levels that are increasingly unaffordable to their tenants.

The news that housing providers could struggle to build sufficient homes after 2015 comes after it was announced that there are concerns whether landlords will even deliver the current affordable homes programme. Government figures show starts onsite had only reached 42,000 by last autumn against a target of 58,000 homes to be completed by March 2015, casting doubts on whether the homes will be finished in time.

So if housing providers have lost their development appetite (for whatever reasons), where will the future new homes come from? Certainly there has been an increase in private developers bidding for grants, but that on its own won't be enough.

Someone will have to do something either at government level to encourage landlords to invest in new builds or by the private sector taking a more active role with stock- and land-owning councils. Otherwise the country could be facing a social housing crisis in the next decade.

Keith Searle
Development Director, Shelton Development Services

Please send your lettters for publication to news@housing-technology.com

Balancing costs and services

Sir – Councils in England were warned recently that there was a danger they could run out of money. This is tough news; councils are faced with an increasing need to find savings, but this often leads to a reduction in front-line services. Perhaps there is another way?

I would suggest that councils should explore the available savings of improving the efficiency of their IT, rather than simply making service cuts. They may be surprised with the results.

Managing social care payments is just one area where significant savings can be made. We know this first hand, having worked with various councils to develop a sophisticated card management system to distribute care payments with greater efficiency and transparency, leading to immediate cost reductions.

Councils may well have different requirements but what's important to remember is that there are cost-effective, non-disruptive and compliant technology platforms available to suit each individual requirement.

It is saddening to think that front line services are being cut in order to make savings that could be made elsewhere using technology.

Hayley Moran
Director, Aquarium Card Management Solutions

Universal credit and channel shifting

Sir – The potential impact of welfare reform is the most significant risk faced by housing providers in recent history. However, it is also seen by forward-thinking boards as an opportunity for positive change.

The exact degree to which cash flows and revenues will be affected by universal credit is uncertain. With many housing providers currently factoring the projected impact of bad debt into their 2014/2015 budgets, a significant number of tenants still don't have bank accounts and will be expected to manage their own rent payments for the first time.

Such volatile and uncertain conditions underline the importance of developing a business transformation strategy where people, processes, and technology are re-aligned to promote and enable new and agile ways of working while delivering excellent customer services and maintaining existing services.

Using technology for 'channel shifting' is important to consider. By 'nudging' and shifting certain tenant interactions and transactions from traditional methods such as telephone, face-to-face or post to more cost-effective forms of communication, such as social media, AVR or online self-service leaves housing providers' customer service teams with more time to deal with more complex tenant queries. At the same time, mobilising the workforce through anywhere-anytime access to business applications and collaboration tools delivers significant productivity gains.

These initiatives will create huge efficiency savings for housing providers while improving tenants' engagement and experience with customer service departments. Selective use of managed services can also improve business agility, reduce risk and improve customer service, allowing in-house teams to focus on core business initiatives.

Nick Holt
Account Director for Housing, Intrinsic

Tangled up in technology

Dominic Holland, comedian, presenter and after-dinner speaker

Comedian, author and TV & radio presenter Dominic Holland, one of the keynote speakers at our Housing Technology 2015 conference next March, shares his thoughts on the latest 'smart' technologies.

Housing and where we live has always been a good benchmark for our place in the world - our rung on the ladder so to speak.

I live in a perfectly nice house.

It is detached and each of my four children has a bedroom of their own. And because this house happens to be in leafy west London, it is a property that I could never afford to buy now and so I might have reason to feel smug and rather pleased with myself.

That is, until I visited a mate's house and any self-satisfied smirk was wiped from my face.

And not just because his house is in an even more desirable area of London and is twice the size but because his dwelling was absolutely stacked with technology and the latest kit.

Technologically speaking, I now realise that I don't live in a house at all. I actually live in a cave because I have to draw the curtains myself and turn on lights. In fact, I do not have a lighting system. I just have lights. My lights do not have settings or moods. My lights are either on or they are off. My mate has light switches but he doesn't have to use them. He uses his console instead and can choose from 18 pre-programmed lighting moods. Presumably one of which is called 'on a promise' or possibly even 'sex' and is linked up with the curtains being drawn, electronically of course.

Us Hollands do have a garden hose. I know this because I can remember buying it although I am not entirely sure where it is. I imagine, somewhere in the depths of my shed or possibly in the garage.

I have central heating but the heat is delivered by radiators which need bleeding and is on my list of things to do. This list is as long as my wife's face and this particular task comes hard on the heels of 'find the bloody radiator key'.

I have a digital radio that I am particularly fond of. It sits on my kitchen worktop but the only way it can be heard if I am not in the kitchen is by the volume button. No such issues for my friend living in the Starship Enterprise with his stereo system plumbed through his ship to every room including each of the loos.

I dread to think what these gadgets must have cost him but it has to be significant, judging by how insistent he was to demonstrate every single gizmo to me.

"Here Dom, watch this."

And the curtains would draw silently and obediently. Then, another click on his console and a television screen descended from the ceiling. Naturally, not just a normal telly either. Blooming enormous for starters. Quicker to measure it in yards than inches, it was loaded with every film and TV programme that had ever been made and I should imagine, films that have yet to even open.

"Hey, Dom, do you fancy a bath?"

No, I'm joking. He didn't ask me this and if he had then I would have left post-haste. But he might as well have done because the house tour I hadn't asked for took in the entire property; all three floors and the four bathrooms as well. Personally, I've never been seduced or suckered by the jacuzzi bath, much preferring the old-fashioned method of putting bubbles into my bath and the speakers in the wall, plus the telly (with films!) and the dimmable lighting didn't appeal much either.

Under-floor heating. Air conditioning. Electric Velux windows. Security worthy of the American Embassy.

I could go on but I won't because I might have left his home realising that I am not as successful as I might have thought but still I was happy to return home to my cave.

Because it's a nice house as I have already said but more so because I already have to defer to my son to turn on our television, and I kid you not.

You will recall that the TV used to be affectionately called the 'box', which is obsolete because we now have an Xbox plus a V-box to negotiate with if the five terrestrial channels are to be found.

And this means that when faced with three remote controls and a television which has no on/off switch, I panic and I am liable to put my foot through the screen with frustration and I find that it is much cheaper and more productive to just shout loudly, "Harry... come and turn on the telly."

And as a compromise, I draw the curtains myself.

Dominic Holland is a professional comedian, awards host, and after-dinner speaker, with numerous television and radio appearances to his name. He will be one of the keynote presenters at Housing Technology 2015 (4-5 March); see also page 38.

North, South, East & West – Quartering the UK housing sector

Two recent surveys have shown that there is a North-South divide over the effects of welfare reform and an East-West divide over tenants' satisfaction with their housing provider.

Big Tenant Survey shows East-West divide in landlord satisfaction
Housing Partners' 'Big Tenant Survey' has shown that there is an East-West divide in UK tenant satisfaction.

Using responses from over 61,000 tenants, Housing Partners has ranked each of the housing providers featured in the survey using a Net Promoter Score (NPS). While the NPS is among the harshest barometers for satisfaction available, it has given a clear idea of where housing providers rank against their peers both locally and nationally. In this instance housing providers in South Wales and the South West and North West of England performed the best according to their tenants' scores.

Richard Blundell, chief executive, Housing Partners, said, "We often hear of the North-South divide in the UK when discussing political, social or cultural issues. But when it comes to social housing satisfaction there's no such split; it seems our sector is split East and West. What our findings show is that tenants living in the West of the country are far more likely to recommend their housing provider to friends and family than those in the East. Only three of the top 20 housing providers fall outside this area.

"We know that the NPS is an exacting measurement of customer satisfaction, but we wanted to provide a starting benchmark for housing providers and the survey has given us this. Those Western housing providers who have excelled should be proud of this result and we can now show those further down the list what the top performing landlords have done to achieve these high scores."

As well as providing an NPS score for over 250 housing providers, the Big Tenant Survey gathered more detailed opinions from tenants on topics such as repairs and maintenance, rent levels, pride in their homes and customer service, where housing providers in the West also generally outperformed their Eastern colleagues.

North-South divide over impact of welfare reforms
One year since the introduction of the government's 'bedroom tax', a new survey by three national council housing organisations has discovered a North-South divide as residents in the North of England appear to be hit the hardest by welfare reforms.

The survey found that tenants in the North of England are more likely to be affected by the under-occupation penalty (13 per cent compared to 5 per cent in London) and also to be in arrears (7 per cent compared with 2 per cent in the capital).

The findings are the result of a research project from the National Federation of ALMOs, the Association of Retained Council Housing and the Councils with ALMOs Group (CWAG) into the effect of welfare reforms on tenants. The three housing bodies represent over 1.3m council properties.

The survey also found that during 2013/2014, the proportion of households affected by the under-occupation penalty and receiving discretionary housing payments has more than tripled in some areas. However, 45 per cent said that even this additional funding was insufficient and that the payments were being supplemented by other forms of local hardship funding. In most cases, this came from the council's housing revenue account.

The survey also found that voids times have not been significantly affected by the introduction of the under occupation penalty and that most organisations have increased staff and resources to collect rent and to support tenants through financial and digital inclusion initiatives.

Curo Housing wins gold for its staff

Curo's executive team (L to R): Gerraint Oakley, Donna Baddeley, Victor da Cunha, Louise Swain, & Simon Gibbs

Curo Housing has been awarded the Investors in People gold standard, joining the top seven per cent of accredited organisations across the UK.

Paul Devoy, head of Investors in People, said, "We'd like to congratulate Curo on its gold standard. Such a high level of accreditation is the sign of great people management practices and demonstrates a commitment to staff development. It shows an organisation committed to being the very best it can be; Curo should be extremely proud."

Donna Baddeley, executive director of corporate services, Curo Housing, said, "We're delighted with this news, it's a great achievement. Striving to excel ensures we can deliver great service to our customers. It's thanks to the hard work and commitment shown by all our colleagues that we have been recognised today."

Magenta Living's apprentices 'get in and go far'

As regular readers will know, Housing Technology is a big fan of housing providers' apprenticeship schemes, so we're delighted to report that Magenta Living has taken on nine new apprentices, from a field of over 400 applicants.

All of Magenta's apprentices started in time to join the government's 'get in. go far' apprenticeship campaign, which involves taking 'selfies' and sharing their experiences via social media.

Jade Taylor and Matthew McCarthy will be working in the IT department at Magenta's head office, Daniel Atkinson starts his career in an administrative role in the housing provider's asset management team, and Cameron Pegler joins the accountancy team.

Building services apprentices include Jack Werner, David Ogilvie, Sam Munro, John Buttery and Alex Owens who will all be learning the ropes in trades including painting and decorating, plumbing, electrical, plastering and joinery.

Jade Taylor said, "University wasn't the right choice for me and I felt an apprenticeship would benefit me much more and suit my style of learning, so I'm very excited about this opportunity."

Chris Boynton, apprentice and technical trainer, Magenta Living, said, "It is so rewarding to be a part of watching the apprentices we recruit turn into highly-skilled workers. All nine of our new starters made an excellent impression at the interview stage, and they delivered great results in their skills tests. The future is now in their hands, but my job is to make sure they grasp the tricks of their chosen trade, and give them a good grounding about working life."

Brian Simpson, chief executive, Magenta Living, said, "It's great to see our commitment to providing work opportunities for young people come into fruition. With such a large number of applicants to contend with, the demand for apprenticeships is clearly at an all-time high, which is something we will be considering for future recruitment drives."

VerseOne and Gwalia herald the launch of .wales domains

VerseOne has helped its long-time customer Grwp Gwalia Cyf become one of the first adopters of the new top level website domain for Wales, '.wales'. The new domain, along with its Welsh counterpart .cymru, was launched in September 2014.

As a Welsh housing provider, Gwalia is representing its sector as part of a select group of organisations who are bringing their Welsh identity online with a .cymru or .wales website, in advance of the wider release of the domains to other organisations this month and the general public next year.

Michael Williams, chief executive, Grwp Gwalia Cyf, said, "We are proud to be a Welsh company, working for the people of Wales. The .wales domain is a chance to wear that commitment on our virtual sleeve."

7Video at Severnside housing

Severnside Housing is working with West Midlands-based 7video over the next 12 months to develop its online digital strategy through a series of videos aimed at tenants and employees. The suite of films is intended to deliver information and advice in an engaging and informative way, eliminating the need for paper-based documents and enabling Severnside to reach a diverse range of individuals and groups more effectively.

Peter Sims, managing director, 7Video, said, "Digital communication is playing a more prominent role in the way organisations connect with their stakeholders, with printed leaflets and factsheets no longer the most effective way to communicate core messages.

Severnside Housing was looking for a more inspiring method of sharing information with its stakeholders, with video offering the opportunity for it to showcase its services share advice and guidance, and reach a much wider audience than before."

Peter Sims, Managing Director, 7Video and Becky Bowyer of Severnside Housing

The partnership's initial project saw 7Video support Severnside's recent stakeholder event, where video footage was used to illustrate community development and highlight to tenants the value of Severnside's Digital Den, a new project offering affordable access to home broadband, as well as its weekly job clubs.

Becky Bowyer from Severnside Housing said, "The library of videos we're planning to produce will offer a convenient way for us to engage with our tenants and our wider team, and also enable us to connect with often hard-to-reach groups."

Accent leaps forward with MIS ActiveH

Accent Group has just completed the upgrade of its ActiveH housing management system by six versions.

Accent first implemented MIS-AMS's ActiveH software in 2012. Although the implementation was a success, its operational systems suffered from teething problems caused by the integration of complex processes from three different subsidiaries. In 2013, Accent consolidated into a single virtual organisation with a personal, modern and better service proposition for its residents. In the intervening period, Accent had declined five ActiveH system upgrades with another one pending.

Andrew Williams, director of customer services, Accent Group, said, "We decided to treat the upgrade as an opportunity to redesign, retrain and rebrand. In the end, we leapt a full six versions which is a key stepping-stone to implementing our ICT strategy for the next couple of years. At the forefront are our plans for mobile working for front-line staff and modern

contact centre arrangements for dealing with what remains the primary channel of communication with residents – the telephone. Our next project is the implementation of our tenant self-service website using the portal functionality provided by MIS-AMS. Without the upgrade, none of this would be possible.

Andrew Williams, Director of Customer Services, Accent Group

During the project, which lasted six months, Accent wrote over 50 new

procedure guides which flushed out differences in the application of processes. It then re-trained every front-line staff member and most back office staff to support users to regain confidence in the system.

Williams said, "In practice, we found out as much about our processes as we learnt about the new system and we plan to further streamline our core processes next year ready for mobile working. Paper-based forms will soon be a thing of the past."

Neal Somerville, IT project manager, Accent Group, said, "The project to successfully upgrade ActiveH by six versions depended on buy-in and commitment from all involved. From 2011 to 2013, we found that MIS had improved its system with many new features that we were not benefiting from. There were over 750 system enhancements that all required analysis and management. A lesson learnt for us; we'll be upgrading at least once a year from now on!"

Iomart supports Wheatley's sporting ambitions

Data centre service provider Iomart is supporting Wheatley Group's project to provide sports kit to clubs in disadvantaged communities in central Scotland.

Beacon Warriors Badminton Club, in one of GHA's communities, was the first of 18 winners to be announced. Youngsters had previously been forced to take turns to train as the club did not have enough racquets or equipment. The prize was presented by Commonwealth Games silver medallist Kirsty Gilmour.

The competition provides sports clubs in disadvantaged communities across the central belt of Scotland with vouchers to buy equipment or kits. Clubs were chosen from within Wheatley's communities, including Glasgow Housing Association, Cube Housing, West Lothian Housing Partnership, Loretto Housing and YourPlace.

The competition was part of Wheatley Pledge, a £1.5 million scheme encouraging Wheatley's contractors and suppliers to do more to help people

who live in the housing provider's neighbourhoods.

Alex McGuire, director of property, Wheatley Group, said, "The competition really caught the imagination of clubs across central Scotland. We're absolutely delighted that our suppliers, such as Iomart, are working with us to make a real difference to sports clubs in some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country."

Iomart, which provides data centre services to GHA, signed the pledge as part of its 'Host Your Kit' campaign which encourages young people to take up sport across the UK.

Phil Worms, director of marketing, Iomart, said, "By working with Wheatley Group, we are supporting disadvantaged communities where funds are not easy to come by. By lessening the financial burden for clubs in those communities, we can help boost participation in sport."

South Lakes selects Civica Housing Cx for mobile working

Civica has signed a five-year agreement with South Lakes Housing to provide an integrated CRM and housing management system. SLH bought the Civica Housing Cx software through the Local Authority Software Applications (LASA) framework, run by the Crown Commercial Service, to replace its Northgate housing management system. The software supports mobile working and ensures that South Lakes can support universal credit and the changes resulting from the introduction of the government's bedroom tax.

Lindsay Simons, director of corporate services, South Lakes Housing, said, "We needed a 'best-of-breed' solution to support our new customer services team and provide an efficient, fully integrated solution with web-based mobile working to optimise the use of our mobile devices and provide enhanced off-site customer services.

"Via a much more streamlined procurement process, we recognised that Housing Cx offered the integration we needed, and that Civica was the right partner to develop future models of working and further improve the services we offer to tenants."

Civica reported that Housing Cx is the first web-based housing management solution, enabling users to access information at any time from any mobile device. The SLH customer services team will now be able to access all tenant information from a central location, meaning queries can be answered quickly and efficiently, without needing to go through different departments. SLH can also offer more proactive support and assistance for tenants affected by the bedroom tax, and Housing Cx will help the housing provider's move to universal credit in 2015.

Jeff Hewitt, managing director of Civica's housing division, said, "This is an exciting project for us as South Lakes Housing is a key strategic partner and one of the first organisations to implement Civica Housing Cx. The deal marks an market shift towards web-based, integrated and mobile working."

Update on Housing Technology 2015

We are delighted to announce that professional comedian Dominic Holland will be entertaining guests at Housing Technology 2015 during the pre-event evening reception on Tuesday 3rd March 2015. Dominic Holland is a comedian, author and after-dinner speaker, and he has also appeared on Have I Got News For You, Loose Ends and The News Quiz, and has hosted his own Radio 4 series. All conference guests will receive a complimentary copy of his new book 'Open Links'.

Housing Technology 2015 is now being supported by 1st Touch, Aareon, Capita, The Housing Contact Company, Housing Partners, Northgate Information Systems, ONI, Orchard, SITS Group and Sovereign Business Integration Group. Further sponsors and exhibitors will be announced shortly.

In addition to presentations from the companies above, there will also be presentations from senior IT executives from Adactus Housing Group, Amicus Horizon, Cairn Housing, Community Housing Cymru, Golden Gates Housing Trust, Helena Partnerships, Midland Heart, NetwIT, Orbit Group, Origin Housing, Peaks & Plains, RCT Homes, Rooftop Group, Severnside Housing, Southern Housing Group, Solihull Community Housing, Trafford Housing Trust, Trident, Thames Valley Housing, Viridian Housing, Wales & West Housing, Wakefield & District Housing, Wheatley Group and WM Housing.

Housing Technology 2015 will take place on Wednesday 4th March and Thursday 5th March at the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry, as well as a pre-event evening reception on Tuesday 3rd March. Please see **www. housing-technology. com/events/ht2015** for full details of Housing Technology 2015.
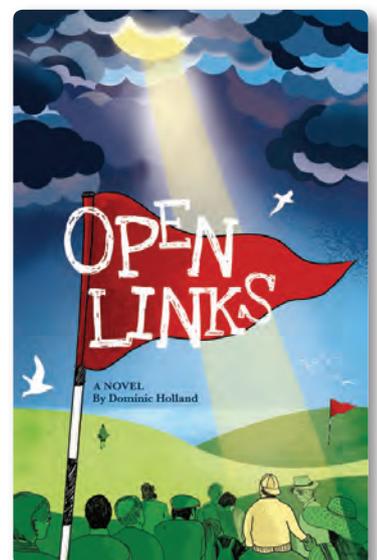
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FRS 102 is introduced

Is your fixed asset solution/spreadsheet capable of dealing with the added complexity and increased data volumes that FRS 102 is set to bring for the 2014/15 comparison year?

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RAM has already helped many housing associations to ensure that they are ready for FRS 102, including:

- South Yorkshire Housing Association
- Thames Valley Housing
- Jephson Housing Association Group

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