ISSUE 65 | SEPTEMBER 2018 | www.housing-technology.com | £6.95

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2019 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM 2019

6-7 MARCH 2019
Q HOTELS' OXFORD BELFRY

BOOK NOW!

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY

HOUSING | IT | TELECOMS | BUSINESS | ECOLOGY

ENGHOUSE STREAMLINES FLAGSHIP'S COMMUNICATIONS
Page 21

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HOUSING
Page 42

IS HOUSING WARMING UP TO SMART CONTROLS?
Page 32

MOAT GOES DIGITAL WITH RACKSPACE & ORM
Page 35

SPECIAL FEATURE

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN HOUSING
Page 28

OTTAWA COMMUNITY HOUSING TAKES KIRONA FOR MOBILE REPAIRS
Page 37

MOBYSOFT HITS A RENTSENSE CENTURY WITH BPHA
Page 18

ALLIANCE HOMES MOVES TO THE CLOUD WITH CIVICA CX
Page 04

HOMEMASTER

DESIGNER SOFTWARE'S NEW HOUSING START-UP
Page 04

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2019 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

GEARING UP FOR HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2019
Page 39

GETTING TENANTS TO HELP THEMSELVES
Page 20

© The Intelligent Business Company 2018. Housing Technology is published by The Intelligent Business Company. Reproduction of any material, in whole or in part, is strictly forbidden without the prior consent of the publisher.

Aareon UK

Housing Management, Mobile & Digital Solutions

Everything you need for end to end business processing from a single supplier

A complete solution that offers you Housing, Financials, HR, Treasury Management & Financial Planning, Reporting, Asset Management, Contact Management, Tenant Portal, Contractor Portal, TaskCentre Alerts, EDRMS and 1st Touch Mobile and Customer Self-Service Apps

For more information visit our website; **www.aareon.co.uk** or call us on 02476 323723

Aareon

1st Touch

EDITOR'S NOTES

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY
HOUSING | IT | TELECOMS | BUSINESS | ECOLOGY

DATA AS YOUR LIFEBLOOD

When we named this year's annual Housing Technology event at the BT Tower, 'Lifeblood 2018 – Data Management in Housing', we had little idea quite how apposite the event's title would be.

With outstanding presentations from BT, GreenSquare, Places for People, PowerObjects, Shal Housing, Torus and Vivid Housing to a packed audience at the BT Tower, the very clear take-away from the event wasn't the usual "spreadsheets are bad" refrain, more a cast-iron imperative for housing providers of all sizes to recognise the absolutely fundamental importance of data to their operations.

BT talked about how it is investing heavily in democratising data and analytics by developing and distributing tools for insight-driven decision making by its staff as well as the option of 'digital sandboxes' for rapid experimentation and hypothesis testing.

GreenSquare covered how it is educating its end-user staff to understand why data is important to both their day-to-day jobs as well as the wider corporate objectives, plus illustrating the need to treat data properly from the outset (i.e. avoiding supposedly temporary spreadsheet 'work-arounds') with a quote from Einstein: "If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"

Places for People used the analogy of a cake to show how it is embedding a consistent data culture, including data now being treated as a strategic group asset, with a corporate-wide understanding that the 'cherry on the cake' (analytics and insights) must have good layers (data management and governance) beneath it.

PowerObjects emphasised the need for data to be counted as a core business asset (and not just an IT headache) in order to drive the business, deliver innovation and provide insights (as long as it is treated with the care it deserves), with additional insights into how non-housing organisations as diverse as Ikea and Goldman Sachs are using their data assets and analytical capabilities to spot some startling and unsuspected business insights.

Torus focused on how data is their lifeblood, without which their IT systems and business operations couldn't function, again underpinning the importance of embedding a 'data culture' and avoiding the dead-ends (i.e. spreadsheets) resulting from settling for temporary data fixes.

Vivid and Shal Housing contrasted the respective size of their organisations yet showed how their democratisation of data is enabling both of them to deliver cost-effective, omni-channel services and embrace their tenants' changing demographics and shifting patterns of technology adoption.

So if you consider your business operations and IT estates as your organisations' brains and hearts (or vice versa), then data is your lifeblood, without which you can't function.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY – EVENING RECEPTION

28 November 2018
Pizza Express, London
housing-technology.com/events/reception2018

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2019 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2019

6-7 March 2019
Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry, Oxford
housing-technology.com/events/ht19

SECTIONS

HOUSING MANAGEMENT PAGE 04
FINANCE MANAGEMENT PAGE 11
CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT PAGE 18
SPECIAL FEATURE PAGE 28
INFRASTRUCTURE PAGE 30
MOBILE WORKING PAGE 36
GENERAL NEWS PAGE 38

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

3C Consultants **10**
Aareon **04** & **20**
Alertacall **23**
Alliance Homes **04**
Appello **27** & **29**
AspireBI **12**
BPHA **18**
BT **34**
CascadeHR **43**
Castle & Coasts Housing **14**
Castleton Technologies **11**
Civica **04** & **06**
Cloud Dialogs **26**
Community Fibre **28**
Comparex **28**
Designer Software **04**
Dumfries & Galloway Housing **11**
Enghouse Interactive **21**
Equity Housing **04**
Flagship Housing **21**
ForViva **39**
Gas Tag **38**
GCI **30**
Geomant **42**
Hallnet **23**
Housing & Care 21 **27**
Housing Insight **24**
Housing Support Pro **38**
Insite Energy **40**
Kirona **37**
Lanarkshire Housing **11**
Leighton **08**
Livin **24**
Mears **17**
Melin Homes **43**
MHR **39**
MHS Homes **26**
MIS AMS **08**
Moat **35**
MobileIron **36**
Mobysoft **18**
My Rent Rewards **13**
n3rgy **31**
Northgate Public Services **05** & **28**
OperaQuest **24**
Orchard **14** & **16**
ORM **35**
Ottawa Community Housing **37**
OutSystems **22**
ParaDPO **27**
Peaks & Plains Housing **18**
Probrand Marketplace **17**
Propeller **26**
Purrmetrix **38**
Q-Bot **33**
Rackspace **35** & **41**
Real Asset Management **11**
ROCC **38**
Secure Meters **32**
Sigma **18**
South Liverpool Homes **14**
Stockport Homes **38**
Stonewater **23**
Stratis Security **30**
Thrive Homes **30**
Torus **23**
VerseOne **19**
WHG **08**

EDITOR
Alastair Tweedie
alastair@housing-technology.com
Twitter: @housingtech

PUBLISHER
George Grant
george.grant@housing-technology.com
Twitter: @tibcomp

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Jo Euston-Moore
design@housing-technology.com

EDITORIAL AND NEWS
news@housing-technology.com

RECRUITMENT
recruitment@housing-technology.com
jobs.housing-technology.com
Twitter: @housingtechjobs

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Subscribe at www.housing-technology.com
or email: subs@housing-technology.com

PRINTED IN THE UK BY
The Magazine Printing Company
www.magprint.co.uk

THE INTELLIGENT BUSINESS COMPANY LTD
Hoppingwood Farm
Robin Hood Way
London, SW20 0AB
United Kingdom

Head Office: 0208 336 2293

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY IS PRINTED ON ERA SILK MADE FROM 50 PER CENT UK-RECYCLED WASTE PULP AND THE BALANCE OF PULPS FROM CERTIFIED FORESTS.

ALLIANCE HOMES MOVES TO THE CLOUD WITH CIVICA CX

Civica has won a five-year contract with Alliance Homes Group to implement its cloud-based Housing Cx and Coldharbour community care software systems.

The IT modernisation programme will consolidate the housing provider's existing internal IT infrastructure, replacing multiple systems with Civica Cx while retaining Civica's Keystone Asset Management system.

With help from Civica, Alliance Homes is now moving from an on-premise IT estate to a flexible and scalable browser-based cloud software platform. This will give employees a unified, single view of tenants for the first time. The new platforms will deliver integrated capabilities across CRM, housing and asset management, care management, workforce management and digital services.

Rob Barton, interim assistant director for ICT, Alliance Homes Group, said, "We looked at the options on the market and chose the Civica Cx and Coldharbour platforms because they have all the integrated management capabilities we need within one system. Civica's offering stood out as a smarter approach in terms of scalability, mobility and ease of use, and also offers us flexibility for the future integration of new technologies."

EQUITY Housing Group

Equity Housing moves to Aareon HMS & 1st Touch mobile

As part of a wide-ranging digital transformation programme, Equity Housing Group has chosen the Aareon QL housing management system and tenant self-service portal alongside the 1st Touch mobile workforce software.

Jon Brownbill, business lead of Equity's housing management transformation project, said, "Having originally chosen Aareon as the market leader in housing management technology, we have since found their strong market presence is underpinned by a level of professionalism and confidence that has bred an enormous amount of trust. In practical terms too, the Aareon system has many clear benefits including efficiency gains, raised productivity and enhanced customer response."

HOMEMASTER

DESIGNER SOFTWARE'S NEW HOUSING SOFTWARE START-UP

New technology start-up Designer Software has just entered the social housing sector with the launch of a new 'web-native' housing management platform for smaller housing providers.

Designer Software has been founded by Ian Thompson as CEO and Craig Brock as COO, both previously with Kypera; together they led the creation of the first fully Microsoft . Net-based housing management system. They are joined by Tony Dunn and John Jarman, both of whom have over 20 years' experience in the development and delivery of software within the housing sector.

Designer Software's first product is HomeMaster, a new web-based housing management system specifically designed for housing providers managing up to 2,500 units. CRM, rents and factoring modules will then be released in early 2019, followed by service charge and repair modules later in 2019. Homemaster's underlying technologies enable users to streamline current processes and natively use the complete system on any device, be that mobile or tablet (both iOS & Android) and all PC browsers.

Ian Thompson, CEO, Designer Software, said, "Without doubt, housing providers with up to 2,500 units have been overlooked until now. The software currently available to them uses old technology and existing suppliers have underinvested in their products. With HomeMaster, the outdated business model of a large licence fee and upfront training and implementation costs has been discarded. Our customers can instead implement HomeMaster on a simple subscription basis."

HOW TO MAKE YOUR HOUSING TECHNOLOGY FLY

Roger Birkinshaw, Housing Director, Northgate Public Services

When it comes to technology, should you take a magpie approach, flocking to the latest bit of kit or perhaps an ostrich, head down and making do with inefficient systems? Northgate Public Services' housing director, Roger Birkinshaw, explains why neither tactic will help address the current challenges in housing.

Time for a fresh approach

Rising demand for social housing, against the backdrop of welfare reform, is a constant concern for housing providers to address. Trying to support better tenant communications and engagement while making cost savings and improving tenant satisfaction is no mean feat.

What's the answer, completely overhaul your existing systems or bolt on every single shiny new advance in technology to give the impression of innovation? This strategy is really only one for the true mavericks and potentially creates gross inefficiencies in excess of the status quo. But there is another way. Investing in new technology should not be regarded as a panacea. The best starting point is to look at existing systems: are you using them to their full capacity and are they flexible enough to expand to your future needs?

Informed decision-making

When looking at integrating new capabilities, it's a great time to bring in your technology providers and ask them what your current systems are capable of. Is there functionality that isn't being used? Make sure you have exhausted all possible options for your existing kit before you invest in anything new. Equally, if the existing system isn't working how you want it to, then raise this issue with your providers. Good suppliers want to support you in helping you meet your business objectives, not instantly advise you to replace an entire system. Purchasing decisions should always be based on the outcomes you want to achieve.

So, what are the key areas housing providers are currently asking for in their systems?

An omni-channel future

Housing providers want to improve the tenant journey, including finding ways to give their tenants access to services at a time convenient for them, using the tools they are comfortable with.

To fully support this, systems need to allow for all information in an enquiry to be captured and viewed by the case worker. This prevents the tenant from having to provide the same information to different departments or repeat their query to multiple staff members.

With the right tools, housing providers can offer tenants a seamless 24/7 service, where they can resolve an enquiry or report a problem on a website, via an app, social media or live chat, freeing staff to help tenants who prefer a face-to-face experience.

Early intervention

Housing providers are focused on gaining a deeper understanding of their tenants' needs, the issues they may be facing now and also predicting potential challenges in the future. In the absence of a crystal ball, providers are looking at how technology can support this aim.

With access to quality information through data analytics, staff can glean greater insights into what support citizens might need, allowing a shift from reactive to proactive service delivery. Knowing why someone always has repair issues or why they frequently struggle with rent arrears will help staff to take appropriate action to resolve issues sooner and prevent them from recurring.

Look beyond improving or upgrading

Taking the magpie approach to IT purchasing soon loses its shine if your systems can't talk to one another. Whether disparate systems and applications have evolved over many years, or they are the result of a more recent merger between two housing providers, they are unlikely to remain agile enough to address today's sector challenges. And databases that don't connect won't allow you to deliver the responsive, engaging customer service you strive for.

By giving staff access to an integrated system, they will be better placed to work collaboratively and share information. This makes it easier for them to respond to tenants' queries more efficiently or resolve problems when they arise.

Proactive tenant support

Data analytics continues to play a fundamental role in helping housing providers achieve the holy grail of responsive customer service, as more personalised and timely communication between the tenant and landlord becomes the expectation.

Providers can use these tools to highlight those tenants who are at risk of late rent payments, for example, and set the system up to send a polite reminder shortly before the rent is due. Or if data has been collated on the performance of a boiler, a tenant can be provided with advice to optimise their energy consumption.

Going back to basics

When budgets are being squeezed, housing providers need to take a close look at the situation before purchasing decisions are made. Will new technology drive improvements for the business and customers?

The only way to do this effectively is for suppliers and housing providers to work together on focusing on the changing needs and expectations of the customer.

Roger Birkinshaw is the housing director for Northgate Public Services.

BECOMING AN INSIGHTS-DRIVEN ORGANISATION

Trevor Hodges, Head of Business Insight & Analytics, Civica Digital

Data is the fuel of your business; you'll have heard plenty of times before how the insights you can glean from it will unlock better products and services, improved customer experiences, greater agility, and lower risk.

And while most organisations have some sort of analytics or business intelligence (BI) capability, few have the true ability to use data to its fullest extent across the whole business.

There are many reasons why this is the case. Sometimes, the work needed to turn an organisation into an insights-driven business is thought to be too complicated, expensive or time-consuming. Elsewhere, there may not be significant realisation of what the competitive advantages could be, meaning projects don't get the buy-in or investment they need.

The truth is that turning your organisation into an insights-driven business can be genuinely transformational, enabling you to innovate fast and differentiate effectively. And the good news is that the changes you'll need to make don't belong in the 'too difficult' pile; done in the right way, you can start seeing results within months.

What do we mean by an 'insights-driven organisation'?

A truly insights-driven business is one that uses its data to underpin decision-making at every level, right across the organisation.

Raw data is transformed into insights, which are embedded into the business's processes and surfaced in the right way at the right time. This means they become integral to decision-making – both operational and strategic. And it's a virtuous circle, because data on the decisions and their outcomes is captured and fed back, to help refine products, services and processes.

So how do you actually get there? We think that there are six main building blocks required to become an insights-driven organisation:

1. Strategy and roadmap

For analytics and insights to be effective, they will touch every aspect of the business. Your strategy should define where you want to get to in terms of your data, analytics and insights. It recognises that you won't reach utopia overnight; delivering this level of change will take time and will ideally be carried out in phases. It also needs to be accompanied by a roadmap that sets out the journey, covering all of these building blocks.

2. High-quality data

Inaccurate or incomplete insights are at best a nuisance and at worst detrimental. This is why you need an up-to-date 'single view' of your critical data, such as tenants, assets, compliance and costs.

3. Technology

To manage all this data, you need appropriate technology. This is likely to include housing management software to create the single view, and combine data into a 360-degree view, and tools that surface the right insights in the right way at the right time. This ecosystem of technology, which you can build incrementally, will help detect changes in data, respond instantly and report as and when required, all with little human intervention.

4. People and skills

To drive through this type of transformation, it's essential it's led by someone at the highest level in the business. This could be a chief analytics officer or the CFO. Remember that successful analytics programmes are business-driven, not IT-driven, so while the CIO will play an important role in delivering the technology side of things, the overall transformation needs to be led from the business side.

5. Organisational change

Closely linked to people and skills is the need for the right organisational structure and culture. How is your business organised now, and how will this need to evolve as you move towards your vision of being truly insights-driven? A change in attitude and culture is vital if you are to break away from a siloed, departmental approach.

6. Process

Finally, you need appropriate processes to govern how data is used and to ensure you're consistent and compliant with all necessary regulations.

Taking your next steps

While this may sound like a lot of work, the key is to start small with things that will deliver noticeable improvements, while keeping an eye on the bigger picture you're aiming to create. Once you deliver early projects and demonstrate the benefits, securing buy-in and budget for later steps will become progressively easier. In this way, you can set your organisation on the path to being truly insights-driven, and the many benefits this will unleash.

Trevor Hodges is head of business insight and analytics at Civica Digital.

With the smart use of digital, we're making it easy for housing associations to transact and manage their customer relationships

- Product Development & Innovation
- Performance & Optimisation
- Digital Business Transformation
- Technology Consultancy

ORM rackspace

www.ormlondon.com
02082395080
enquiry@ormlondon.com

WHAT IS DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION?

Ron Wilcox, Business Development Manager, Leighton

I recently asked a housing client to tell me how they planned to define 'digital transformation' to their team. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the answer was along the lines of, "It's about using IT to make improvements to services and systems". After a pause, I went on to draw out so much more than this from their initial answer.

Because the question isn't really "How do we define digital transformation?", it's actually "How do we all adjust to a digital world?". If you were to ask your colleagues or tenants the latter question, the answers would be much more revealing than to the former.

For housing providers and digital experts like Leighton, we need to be planning for the impact of the digital world in our communities and homes. What does the challenge of a tripartite set of emerging and overlapping ecosystems (i.e. Apple vs. Android vs. Amazon) mean for us all? Which IoT sensors can reduce my maintenance costs? What sensors can improve tenant safety and reduce risk while maintaining privacy? How can we interact with tech-savvy tenants while not alienating those less tech-enabled?

When we ask in this very publication, quite rightly, if digital transformation is a sticking plaster or in-depth surgery, we need to be sure to understand that it can be both of these things, and everything in between, depending on our energy and vision to adjust to the changing digital world. The housing providers that take a lead and have the confidence to ask for help from digital experts are the ones that will be best placed to realise the commercial, service-driven and efficiency savings that great innovation can bring.

Ownership of smart devices has doubled during the past two years and the same lack of understanding about the impact of digital transformation carries itself into actual customer-driven realisations. A recent PwC survey concluded, "Before making a purchase, only one in five people expect to be positively impacted by a connected home device. But once purchased, consumers report much higher levels of actual consumer value. The perceived health benefit of a hub or assistant is rated as 13 per cent, increasing to 44 per cent after purchase and energy meters reported a pre-purchase impact value of 23 per cent for comfort and 56 per cent in financial terms, rising to 54 per cent and 72 per cent respectively once installed." This reinforces the fact that in the digital world, many consumers don't fully understand the potential impact of innovation.

A great way to draw out vision from colleagues, to ultimately support their understanding of innovation, is often to start with "imagine if…". This is a good place to start because it appeals to the humanity in our organisations, and not the IT. And it's our people who will be responsible for defining the vision and delivering the results.

So, imagine if… your maintenance teams knew when a boiler part was about to fail before it did. Imagine if… your tenants had an easy way to add an Amazon Echo to their landlord's app to pay a bill. Imagine if… you could reduce inbound service calls to zero by having an amazing online chat-bot.

Over to you – we and others can't wait to help.

Ron Wilcox is the business development manager for Leighton.

WHG GOES LIVE WITH MIS ACTIVEH

WHG has just completed the installation of the latest version of MIS AMS's ActiveH housing management software as part of its overhaul of its technology infrastructure.

James Elliott, IT solutions delivery manager, WHG, said, "When I joined WHG, I soon realised that the existing systems needed modernising. However, before taking any steps towards a more digital way of working, I wanted to experience first-hand how technology was being used across the workforce.

"Because WHG had multiple in-house systems, it was difficult to decide how to move the business forward digitally. We took time to understand the landscape and how technology could help our staff's workloads before defining our approach. Luckily for us, the team at MIS AMS were with us at every stage and played a vital part in mapping out our transformation.

"We started our upgrade in May 2017; these changes have provided much greater integration across the group and increased mobility in the way our teams work, including access to a single, central store of data.

"This was always going to be the first step in digitising our processes, so we're now working with MIS to bolt-on more of their products, plus we're about to go live with our new tenant portal."

Evolving asset portfolio strategies in an evolving sector

Discover how our Business Intelligence Solutions provide critical insights into asset and organisational performance

- Asset Value & Option determination
- Asset Information Hub
- Advanced Analytics

AspireBI

Visit www.AspireBI.co.uk

TRANSFORMING SMALLER HOUSING PROVIDERS

Colin Sales, Managing Director, 3C Consultants

There are many advantages to being small: you have more legroom on a plane; you tend to bump your head less often; and you're more likely to be able to get a job as a jockey.

When 'small' is applied to running a business, management are more likely to be involved in every aspect of service delivery; they are likely to know the names of their entire team; and when in the office, they normally don't have very far to walk from the front door to their desk. Importantly, the smaller the business, the more agile it tends to be and a change in strategic course can often be achieved faster.

However, being small also presents its challenges. The social housing sector is on a trajectory of rapid change and organisations are looking to provide ever greater value, seeking technological solutions to new and different tenant demands and expectations. How do small businesses find the skills, resources and budget needed to successfully adapt?

Although many accept that the future will see service delivery digitised and provided online, this is accompanied by a fear of taking a business that is working fine and introducing technology that might cause chaos. As is often said: "If it ain't broke, then don't try and fix it". And yet some of the best examples of digital business transformation are seen within relatively small housing providers that have invested a fraction of what the larger providers have, while achieving more.

Change is inevitable, and our job as business leaders is to adapt and manage this. We ourselves have changed the way that we want to deal with those that provide us with services, so we need to accept that many of our customers will want to engage with us differently. Gartner, a leading research and advisory firm, recently reported on executive best practice and stated that business leaders should allocate two-thirds of their time operationally, working 'in' the business, while the rest of their time should be spent working 'on' the business, with 14 per cent of their time invested in innovation and planning improvements and 20 per cent of their time then spent successfully implementing the associated changes. How many of us can say we invest this much time in the development and management of change within our businesses?

As an example of what can be achieved, Cornwall Rural Housing has developed an IT strategy that both supports the organisation in achieving its service ambitions, while improving data security and compliance. With only seven staff, CRH can certainly claim to be a small housing association, but its chief executive, Peter Moore, has been keen to explore how the business could move to a more effective business model by using technology better. He soon discovered that CRH could afford to implement an IT strategy that provided the benefits that previously were only considered available to those with large IT budgets.

Within a 12-month period, CRH is:

- Installing new IT hardware;
- Implementing a robust offsite backup solution, so supporting business continuity and DR;
- Moving to Office 365 and Microsoft cloud services;
- Introducing a web portal (to be implemented by the end of 2018), with full connectivity in real time with CRH's housing management software, so that tenants will be able to update their details, make appointments, report problems and view tenancy documentations, and staff will be able to access the system from anywhere and help tenants with digital services.

Such has been the success of this portal that the first housing provider to implement it is now achieving over 60 per cent of its tenant transactions online.

How much would such an IT strategy cost? Well, in CRH's case, the five-year cost is far less than six figures. Add to this the significant improvements anticipated in customer service, governance, staff working and business security, and the business case is extremely compelling.

In summary, technology and digitisation are changing the way we do business. Providing services that are not only highly regarded by tenants, but that also provide value for money, is increasingly key to the long-term security of almost any business. The question is not should you review both your business and IT strategies to take best advantage of technology, but how and when you do it?

Colin Sales is the managing director of 3C Consultants.

Castleton gains Dumfries & Galloway Housing contract

Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership has appointed Castleton Technologies to support an extensive digital programme. The project involves migrating DGHP's daily operations onto a private cloud, moving away from its current on-premise solutions, and a refresh of its desktop software.

This contract is part of a wider transformation agenda which includes the procurement of a new unified communications telephony solution, the transfer of all of DGHP's staff onto Microsoft Office 365 and the procurement of a fully-integrated business solution to replace DGHP's current systems.

Hugh Carr, director of HR and IT, Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership, said, "This exciting development with Castleton Technologies marks the next stage in our journey to become the best landlord in Scotland. Our programme is ambitious, but we hope it will confirm DGHP as a progressive housing provider of the future by enabling us to provide excellent services to our tenants and create a great place to work for our 200 staff."

DGHP was independently advised by Alysium Consulting during the technology tendering and procurement processes.

LANARKSHIRE HOUSING'S RAM COMPONENT ACCOUNTING

Lanarkshire Housing Association has implemented component accounting software from Real Asset Management in a drive to tighten its current processes and maintain compliance with FRS 102.

LHA had reached a stage where its £28 million asset base, comprising myriad components such as land, roofs, windows, kitchens, heating systems and bathrooms, needed a more rigorous and intelligent solution than its existing spreadsheet-based processes.

Laurie Boles, finance and corporate services director, Lanarkshire Housing Association, said, "We were looking for an IT supplier with experience of the social housing sector as well as a solution that provides value for money, is easy to use, intuitive and flexible in query access and reporting.

"We evaluated a couple of systems but RAM was chosen because of its track record in delivering component accounting software in housing. The defining factor was seeing it in a live environment and obtaining good feedback from RAM's other housing customers regarding its ease of use and smooth migration."

RAM's software is now mainly being used for recording and monitoring the component-level detail of LHA's housing stock. It dovetails into its annual accounting process and enables the organisation to undertake more accurate depreciation forecasting during each financial year, where previously this capacity was hampered due to the complexity of its spreadsheets. Sector-specific functionality such as the quick and easy importing of component replacement assets and the linking of associated component and grant records to the property unit is also heavily used.

Boles said, "The preparation of our 'fixed-asset note' used to be time-consuming and required the management of large volumes of data. Since the implementation of RAM's component accounting software, the preparation time alone has been reduced by two weeks compared with previous years."

Having the capability within the software to natively produce the financial reports in the right format for its annual accounts provides LHA with the peace of mind regarding FRS 102 compliance. Data integrity is also greatly improved because there is no need for manual interventions; this has been further validated by LHA's external auditors following its recent year-end audit.

Boles said, "Previously, we approached component accounting as an annual task, but we are now using the software proactively as a forecasting tool in operational and longer-term financial plans."

SOLID FOUNDATIONS FOR PROCUREMENT DECISIONS

Ian Ellis MBA, CEO, AspireBI

Having spent over 22 years with EY (formerly Ernst & Young), advising on acquisitions, flotations, privatisations, business and share valuations and business investments in general, I have come across numerous reasons for investment, some of which were objective financial or strategic targets and some which were merely idiosyncratic whims of powerful proponents.

My team's role was always to identify the financial and strategic benefits of an investment decision and present them rationally. Every decision carries risk and involves a hypothesis of future events and circumstances, but a lack of certainty doesn't excuse a lack of sound appraisal.

During the past 16 years, we have seen interesting ideas around investments and related asset valuations in our own social housing sector, with some debatable appraisal and valuation methodologies still apparent, and my particular concern is with the rationalisation of financial, social and strategic values within investment appraisals and asset valuations.

Every investment has desirable attributes that cannot be monetised, as well as a monetary cost and prospective returns. It follows that any asset (resulting from past investments) has monetary and non-monetary values. Humans make sense of this in their day-to-day investment decisions, for example when buying a car, by ranking the value of the non-monetary attributes they want (such as mpg, colour, speed, fashion and comfort) and buying the vehicle that they can best afford from their attribute list. Compromises can be made around desirable attributes, but affordability is an absolute that should be adhered to (whims notwithstanding). Perpetually ignoring the absolute constraints of affordability in one's day-to-day financial decision-making is the road to bankruptcy. A complex scoring system may, however, be a useful explanation to one's spouse for any overspending.

Commercial investment decision-making is no different. Ignoring differing attitudes to risk, which is a whole other topic, overall investments must always adhere to financial constraints (there are always individual exceptions), whereas compromises can more often be made around some of their non-monetary objectives.

The subsequent value of the aforementioned car (or any asset), similarly, involves its non-monetary attributes as well as its financial (disposal, continued use or replacement) values. Combining monetary and non-monetary values to create a single 'value' can look decisive and elegant but does it have any credence?

The housing sector's history of combining monetary and non-monetary values, or scores, may be a hangover from tendering activities, where a tender is often afforded a score out of 100 for its price, to be combined with scores for other desirable attributes of the tender submission. It can be suggested that this flies in the face of the argument that, to be successful, all organisations should buy the best they can afford. In law, combined scoring of this nature would be a target for the prosecution challenging the efficacy of a failed procurement.

By scoring and weighting all non-monetary requirements, then ranking the scores before comparison against prices ('to buy the best they can afford'), discretion could be retained, and subjectivity would be reduced in the overall investment decision.

The process of buying the best one can afford carries over to values. If assets are retained, disposed of or replaced without considering the absolute nature of one's financial position and their impact on it, then any sensible investment decisions that went into building that financial position can be undermined.

In commercial corporate finance, the problem of reconciling financial and strategic values is overcome by considering them as two sets of variables that interact to inform a sound decision, with some strategic imperatives driving an investment, others merely influencing it. If they do neither, then why are they considered at all?

If a strategic or social objective can be monetised, it can be included in financial projections. Otherwise, it may be subjected to some form of 'desirability' ranking. Moscow rules (must have, should have, could have, would have) are useful starters. If a single non-monetary attribute score is needed, then scores can be applied to each desired attribute for an asset score. In identifying values driving or influencing an asset's value, there are bounds to human rationality. It's claimed that an average human can hold between five and nine variables in working memory at any one time.

If, say, 20 separate values are included in arriving at the non-monetary value of an asset, it becomes difficult for the average human to understand the relevance of a single value score for that asset or to understand the key drivers of that overall value, thereby preventing consensus-building. It also stretches the concept that the asset's value should only be based on values that drive or influence financial investment decisions surrounding the asset.

The US economist Herbert Simon suggested that economic agents often use heuristics (rules of thumb) to make decisions rather than a strict rigid rule of optimisation, due to their inability to process and compute the expected utility of every alternative action. This remains true, hence the need to limit the

SOLID FOUNDATIONS FOR PROCUREMENT DECISIONS

Continued from previous page

degree of heuristics (i.e. artificial scoring of an otherwise sound value measure) applied to the financial elements of decisions; instead looking for sound financial measurement of intended investments and of their opportunity costs. By contrast, regardless of the clarity of non-monetary values, heuristics remain in scoring them for decision-making purposes.

As financial constraints become tighter, affordability becomes a more important element of investments and maintaining or improving the financial value of an asset portfolio becomes imperative. As our sector moves from a subsidised regime to one that is fully commercial, eking out subsidies while complying with regulatory demands complicates financial decision-making but increases its importance.

Non-monetary factors cannot be ignored in investments or portfolio improvement and not all strategic drivers for investment can be monetised, just as not all factors that contribute towards an organisation's goals can be monetised. However, the assessment of the financial aspects of investments and portfolios can use rigorous and objective bases, demonstrating sound custodianship.

Once evaluated, financial conclusions can be led or challenged by non-monetary considerations.

The sector should reconsider the concept of a single value for an asset that combines financial scores with non-monetary attribute scores. Generally, such models combine the NPV of net earnings with social values but in certain circumstances, asset market value may be more important than both and even net-book values can sway because of the potential impact on published accounts or charges. Hence, even financial values cannot readily be combined; but they can at least be compared.

Armed with a non-monetary value for an asset and its various financial values (NPV of net earnings, OMV-VP, EUV-SH, NBV and so on), assets and groups of assets can be compared, and valid investment decisions made using tried and tested commercial appraisal techniques. For instance, the ubiquitous two or three-dimensional BCG Matrix or 'Boston Box' can be adapted to:

- Compare strategic values with earnings to identify the best and worst performers and hence imperatives for improvement, disposal, etc;
- Compare earnings values with disposal values for poor strategic performers;
- Categorise assets to identify investment-worthiness;
- Make sense of more than one competing value.

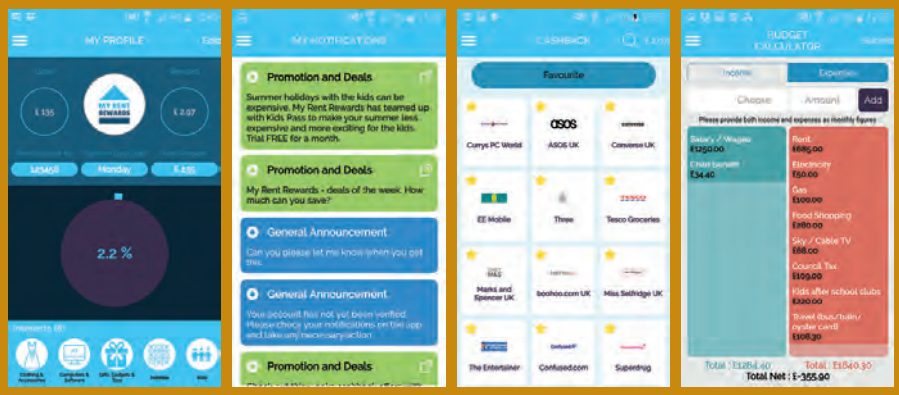
Analytics software applied to monetary and non-monetary values can suggest improvement strategies. Predictive analytics from finance and other systems can identify asset value improvement possibilities that traditional investment appraisals can't.

A wealth of information, often outside finance systems that can sometimes lack granularity, can now be very easily harvested with modern business intelligence software to aid organisations wanting to understand asset value drivers to improve their portfolios and investment decisions.

Until valuation gimmicks and customary forecasting and valuation practices are challenged, the sector will not equip itself for the very challenging financial future in front of it.

Ian Ellis MBA is the CEO of AspireBI.

MY RENT REWARDS APP LAUNCHES IN HOUSING



Marketed as "the first cashback app that pays your rent", My Rent Rewards has been launched for the UK's social housing tenants. The app is free for tenants and is available from Apple iTunes and Google Play Store.

All the cashback raised from tenants' purchases from My Rent Rewards' retail partners is ring-fenced and paid directly to their housing provider. For housing providers, in addition to making their rental income a little more secure, they can gain insight into the financial behaviours of their tenants and understand more about the reasons why tenants fall into arrears.

Nicola Fahey, co-founder, My Rent Rewards, said, "With changes in the housing sector, such as universal credit, we thought that tenants would be interested in a product that helped them to save money towards their rent. We believe that an app is the best way to deliver the cashback, due to the popularity of smartphones and apps."

Orchard transforms income collection for Castles & Coasts

Castles and Coasts Housing has engaged with Orchard to become more proactive in its approach to income collection with the implementation of Income Analytics.

In common with most other housing providers, Castles and Coasts has found that tenants who go into arrears will bury their heads in the sand rather than engage with support, so the housing provider is constantly looking at methods to support them before they get into financial difficulties.

After a review of the market for income collection software, Castles and Coasts chose Orchard Income Analytics because they found it very intuitive to use and was a good match for how its income officers were already working. Furthermore, Income Analytics can be customised for each officer so they can target the areas they want to on any given day.

With Income Analytics triaging arrears cases, Castles and Coasts' income officers no longer need to check all accounts in arrears, saving time and giving focus to those that need assistance. Furthermore, being both mobile- and tablet-friendly, Income Analytics enables the income officers to gain access to tenants' account details and transaction histories and provide immediate advice while out and about.

Jonathan Graham, income manager, Castles and Coasts Housing Association, said, "We chose Orchard's Income Analytics because it is a new and innovative product that enables us to improve our efficiency associated with income collection, to tackle arrears quickly and support those tenants who need it most.

"We were particularly impressed with Income Analytics' dashboard features and reporting options. A key strength of the product has been its ability to use daily data updates and its capacity to hold data for years rather than months. This has allowed us to use both recent data and analyse longer periods of time to identify overall trends."

SOUTH LIVERPOOL HOMES TAKES ORCHARD INCOME ANALYTICS FOR RENT ARREARS

Orchard's Income Analytics software has been chosen by South Liverpool Homes to reduce its rent arrears.

Jackie Bishop, income enforcement manager, South Liverpool Homes, said, "We are already seeing a rapid response from tenants to our SMS messages and emails, meaning that this cuts down on our income officers having to visit homes and enables them to discuss accounts with customers in a prompter manner."

The housing provider reported that in many cases, tenants are contacting its income team very quickly following an email or text message, with the update time between Income Analytics and SLH's housing system reduced to just five minutes because tenants were calling up almost immediately after receiving notification of their arrears in order to settle payment.

Bev Lee, systems manager, South Liverpool Homes, said, "Ongoing releases of Income Analytics with new functionality are implemented quickly with minimal disruption. Orchard's staff are really helpful and respond quickly to any enquiries or issues raised."

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2019 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM 2019

6-7 MARCH 2019
Q HOTELS' OXFORD BELFRY

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY NETWORKING IT STRATEGY

rackspace®

FIND OUT HOW WE PROVIDED PINNACLE THE AGILITY TO ACT QUICKLY ON BUSINESS NEEDS AND FOCUS ON ENHANCED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES.

RACKSPACE.COM/CUSTOMER-STORIES/PINNACLE-GROUP

rackspace®

Pinnacle Group

COMPLIANCE – ARE YOU NEGATING YOUR ASSET RISK?

John Buckland, Head of Asset Management, Orchard

When I was thinking about what to cover in a piece on compliance, it struck me that compliance may mean different things to different people. To the finance and housing departments, compliance may be about HCA governance and IDAs, while those involved in asset management would have a different definition.

Well, as you'd expect, I come at this from an asset management viewpoint and, from that perspective, most people would agree that there are five main areas: gas safety, electrical safety, legionella, fire risk and asbestos.

These are in people's minds because either they affect many properties or the effect of a single incident is very significant. They are the ones which have statutory regulation in place, on which you will be audited and where sanctions include jail for non-compliance.

Having said that, there are many other areas of compliance which should not be overlooked. In theory, anything for which you have a service or inspection contract/regime in place falls into this category. If there was no risk, even if only of inconvenience, to tenants, visitors or staff, there would be no need for the servicing or inspections. These might include: lifts, door- entry systems, automatic door/barrier systems, play areas, grounds maintenance, trees, fire alarms and fire-fighting systems, carbon monoxide/smoke/heat detection, bath hoists, communal generators, emergency lighting, communal air-handling plant, lightning conductors, commercial kitchen appliances, commercial laundry equipment, building energy management, domestic white goods, dry risers, smoke vent and louvre systems, solar and PV panels, CCTV, air conditioning, intruder alarms and many more...

What about other standards against which you are measured, such as

Decent Homes, SHQS, WHQS and HHSRS? Do these come under the compliance banner? They may well do, so you may have to broaden your thinking to consider all such areas and to ask whether you have regimes in place and, if so, are they being effectively monitored and managed.

Historically spreadsheets have been king and, even now when there are effective systems in place in an organisation, it's not unusual to find that someone has developed a spreadsheet or even procured a separate piece of specialist software to monitor an individual area of compliance. This is usually because, firstly, people still work in silos and don't know or care that there are systems in place and, secondly, because there is no overall strategy in place or being effected to pull these threads together.

Compliance has to be regarded as a top-down issue. A strategic compliance framework needs to be in place to guide the board and managers. It's not good enough to just appoint a compliance manager or, worse still, rely on individual managers for different compliance areas. An organisation needs to be able to rely on there being a single version of the truth derived from a single, validated property list and a consistent approach to managing the processes involved.

Such a compliance framework ensures that policies and systems are kept abreast of the latest legislative changes (for example, the changes currently being considered by the HSE which, for gas servicing, would allow the expiry date for the LGSR to be more than 12 months from the last service if that last service was undertaken early).

A framework will also assign responsibility. In this context, I mean that areas of compliance should have nominated owners within the organisation. This is not the same as the 'Responsible Person' in the regulations which, in most cases, means the RSL (of course, there will be multiple Responsible Persons in a group structure).

A framework may also put in place a system of independent quality audits of field work. If you don't audit your contractor's work, are you certain of the quality of their servicing and inspections?

With such a framework, a board will be able to be assured that an organisation is compliant by asking:

- Do we know what the key regulations, legislations and codes of practice are and how to respond/adhere to them?
- Do we know who owns each area of compliance, both strategically and operationally?
- Do we have clarity on how we manage risk by having a signed policy and associated procedures in each compliance area?
- Do we have clarity on control, control owners and control evaluation?

When they also ask "how can we be assured that we are fully compliant?", then the answer has to be that there is a proper management system in place with reliable reporting on data that is being properly and consistently maintained.

COMPLIANCE – ARE YOU NEGATING YOUR ASSET RISK?

Continued from previous page

So what functionality should a software solution for compliance management offer? In my view, the following is a reasonable list:

- Individual items requiring servicing or inspection should allow multiple cycles to be in operation, allowing for separate actions for each cycle (for example, a lift may have annual, quarterly and monthly actions). They should also, where relevant, be assigned to service contracts/contractors.
- All service and repair visits should be recorded, whether or not the service was completed.
- Certificates, photographs and any relevant documentation should be recorded and viewable for each visit.
- Escalation processes for failed access should be built in and should include the generation and recording of letters and any other communications sent to tenants and responsible staff members.
- Where an inspection requires follow up action, that the action is prompted, recorded and there is a full audit trail through to resolution.
- An easily-managed set of interfaces for automated bulk loading of data from servicing and inspection contractors and consultants.
- Information on the status of compliance under various headings should be visible to those who need it, both within the compliance system and through integration with other systems.
- Targets and KPIs should be established so that dashboards will give an instant picture of compliance performance.
- The facility to maintain data for, and report on, independent quality audits of field work.
- Reporting capability is key as there is a need to measure and demonstrate compliance in all areas.

If your asset management system can deliver all of this and integrate it with all its other functionality and with your housing management and mobile working systems, then you're onto a winner.

John Buckland is head of asset management at Orchard.

Mears streamlines IT buying with Probrand Marketplace

Housing repairs and maintenance contractor Mears Group is now using the Probrand Marketplace for all of its IT procurement.

Mears had been working with a single supplier of IT hardware and software for several years and although Mears' procurement team wasn't dissatisfied with the relationship, it wanted to challenge the status quo and assess its options.

Claire Wilkinson, head of service delivery, Mears Group, said, "We had been sticking to what we knew for some time and we wanted to look at the situation with a fresh pair of eyes. What we quickly realised was that a better alternative was available."

Mears discovered that they could guarantee low margins and therefore better prices for IT hardware and software by buying products and services through the Probrand Marketplace.

The Probrand Marketplace saves users time and money when procuring IT by offering price comparisons on products from multiple suppliers. Mears now has access to more than 300,000 products from 2,500 brands. All prices and stock levels are updated by-the-minute in a real-time, transparent environment, with technical experts on hand to support buying decisions if needed.

Wilkinson said, "With our previous supplier, we wouldn't know if an item had been delivered because there was little or no communication. We'd only find out when our own customer contacted us. We would then find ourselves in a situation where we were being told that the product was out of stock or that we'd have to wait two weeks.

"The experience is a big improvement on what we had before; the Probrand Marketplace is like a business version of Amazon, but better. They let us know who has signed for the product and when. The whole administrative process is a lot simpler too and it enables us to get products to customers much faster.

"We sometimes check to see if we can buy things cheaper elsewhere but this is rarely the case. We are making savings every day; it might be £10 on a monitor or £150 on a software licence. When you add up all these day-to-day savings, it makes a huge difference."

MOBYSOFT HITS A RENTSENSE CENTURY WITH BPHA

Bill Young, Account Director - Mobysoft (L), George Parkinson, Head of Housing - BPHA & Anna Humphries, Director of Customer Services - BPHA (R)

BPHA has become Mobysoft's 100th customer in the UK housing sector for its RentSense income analytics software, with the aim of protecting its rental revenues and mitigating the effects of universal credit.

George Parkinson, head of housing operations, BPHA, said, "With the continued roll out of universal credit, we are spending much more staff time on arrears cases so we wanted to find a more efficient way of managing our arrears rather than increasing staff resource.

"We looked at a number of different solutions, including one from our existing HMS provider, but found that Rentsense was the only product that offered a proven track record of success. We spoke to a number of other housing providers already using the system and they confirmed Mobysoft's figures in terms of efficiency gains."

Before choosing RentSense, BPHA went through an exhaustive procurement exercise, including a 'discovery day' with Mobysoft, which analysed their existing systems and processes to highlight strengths and weaknesses so that BPHA could focus on specific areas for improvement.

Parkinson said, "The discovery day is very beneficial, and we would strongly recommend this to other housing providers. It's always worth investigating what systems are available to help with reducing arrears and how they can form part of a package of improvements to maximise rental income."

Paul Evans, commercial director, Mobysoft, said, "RentSense is constantly being updated to reflect the changes in welfare reform, so it really helps housing providers to minimise the impact of universal credit. We are also adding new modules, such as automation, which actions arrears cases for officers, freeing up valuable capacity."

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

Peaks & Plains appoints Sigma for web UX

Leading user experience (UX) consultancy, Sigma, has been chosen by Peaks and Plains Housing Trust to deliver a refreshed and improved website, with a key focus on user experience.

The first stage of the project, covering 'discovery and design', will see Sigma's UX specialists run a series of workshops with Peaks and Plains' staff, create an interactive design prototype and carry out usability testing with tenants.

The second stage will see Sigma implement the chosen designs, including front- and back-end development, testing across the website's functionality and accessibility, and cross-browser/platform testing. The site will be built using Umbraco, an open-source web content management system, and integrated with online self-service functionality.

Aileen O'Riordan, digital communications lead, Peaks and Plains Housing Trust, said, "Sigma has offered us something more than just an out-of-box solution. We chose them for their focus on user-centred design and our previous work with them on digital inclusion. By putting our tenants at the heart of the development process, we can be sure that our new Umbraco website will be a great platform on which to continue to enhance our services."

ACHIEVING HOLISTIC DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Alan Neilson, Founder & Executive Chairman, VerseOne

In both the private and the public sectors there's a healthy interest in properly and effectively embracing digital transformation in order to reap the very real benefits that this approach brings.

Listening to and reading about what is being said about digital transformation, it's very apparent that there isn't a clear definition and understanding of this important and truly business transformative strategy.

We have been championing and leading the proper adoption and deployment of this methodology over the past decade so we believe we have a thorough understanding of this, which has been well honed through practical deployment with our customers in the social housing, healthcare and broader commercial sectors.

Let's be clear – digital transformation isn't about user-friendly or great-looking websites, setting up some social media channels or integrating some of the key enterprise systems. Though all of these do form a part of the bigger picture which needs to be kept in mind, in order to effectively deploy and gain the most from digital transformation.

What is our definition of digital transformation?

Digital transformation is a 'whole organisation approach' and a way of life that places the tenant at the very heart of the business and concentrates on making all aspects of the customer's interaction simple, clear, fast and as cost effective as possible. This means a tenant-first culture, supported by joined-up processes and integrated technology systems across the whole organisation. Simply put, digital transformation is all about people (our customers and the team within our own business) collaborating to create fruitful and amazing experiences that engage and wow the customers, ensuring continuous delivery of better business outcomes for them, leading to real competitive advantage for the business.

This means everyone within the organisation needs to be involved by adopting and applying a 'whole of the business' approach and mindset to customer interactions and service delivery. This needs to be supported by digital tools and methodologies that actively support a deliberate move away from operating in silos. Services need to be reusable and interconnected, supported by platforms that can be leveraged and shared by everyone across the whole business in the quest to give the customer the best and most joined-up experience.

One of the founding principles here at VerseOne is to focus on what we affectionately call the '3Ps':

- **Process –** This is ensuring the existence of joined-up processes across the whole business, with exceptional customer engagement and experience at the forefront of everyone's minds. This will lead to efficient and cost-effective service delivery which again everyone needs to understand and practice. Issues such as usability, user experience, service design and other customer transformative experiences and flow of customer-critical interactions throughout the business need clearly to be thought through, streamlined and communicated internally and externally.
- **People –** This is intended to highlight that all stakeholders within the organisation need to be bought in, engaged and involved and actively lead by example. Digital transformation would only deliver real benefits if a 'whole business' approach is adopted. This means everyone within the business having deep understanding of the customers and being trained, empowered and passionate about handling customers, their needs and issues.
- **Platform –** This is where most people focus on when thinking about implementing a digital transformation strategy. While this is an important component, to get the most from the overall strategy the other '2Ps' would also need firmly to be in place. Here the focus should be all about the right technology platform(s) to underpin the digital transformation agenda, facilitating a true interconnection of all vital areas of the business (front- and back-office and third-party organisations) in order to provide a seamless, rapid and fruitful experience for customers. With the lines between the physical and digital becoming ever more blurred and meshed into one, customers expect to be able to move seamlessly between different channels and simply have access to the right content anytime and on any device.

So the key message is that to gain the many real benefits of digital transformation, a well thought out and tailored strategy needs to be devised. It has to be recognised that the strongest drivers of change in today's digital landscape are customers' rapidly evolving expectations and behaviours. Only by keeping pace with these can the battle for engagement, loyalty and relevance be won, ultimately creating an effective competitive advantage and thus a real RoI for implementing digital transformation.

In short, you need to ensure your digital strategy aligns with your business goals, and as importantly to the needs of your tenants and staff, all underpinned by powerful and interconnected technology platforms that meet your present and future needs.

Alan Neilson is the founder and executive chairman of VerseOne.

GETTING TENANTS TO HELP THEMSELVES

Geraint Griffiths, Managing Director, Aareon UK

Self-service is now an integral part of our daily lives. Self-service check-outs at supermarkets are second nature and in banking, self-service apps are ubiquitous. It's also commonplace to book medical appointments online and to receive texts reminding you to attend. Naturally, this sets a marvellous precedent for social housing.

There have been many technology advances that have impacted social housing: digital by default, IoT, big data and cloud to name just a few, where each raises both challenges and opportunities. However, of all these, it's self-service that is likely to have the greatest impact, whether through tenant portals or dedicated apps.

At Aareon, we have a number of customers who have pioneered self-service, such as Raven Housing, Thrive Homes, Thenue and Halton Housing. Their aim is to encourage the majority of tenants to manage their accounts online. This significantly reduces the transactional demand on the organisation, particularly around call-centre costs where staffing and 'on-costs', such as office space, are significant.

So what's the key to the widespread adoption of self-service technology? It's a process of changing customers' hearts and minds to convert desire into action.

To effect this change, there are three areas to address:

Omni-channel marketing

I'm always impressed by the marketing ingenuity of housing providers to drive self-service use. There are traditional methods such as advertising, PR and direct mail. Even more interesting though, is when the housing providers add targeted customer messages to their vans or print them on rent statements. Others produce slick social media content to emphasise the benefits.

Online content and service availability

There is now an enormous range of information and a plethora of services that can be accessed through self-service systems. For example, tenants can: update contact details; view rent-statements, balances and arrears; make payments; request and schedule repairs and view repairs history; generate electrical and gas certificates; log estate issues and anti-social behaviour; rent garages; and upload photos and videos (e.g. graffiti or fly-tipping).

To be effective though, all of these need to be viewable simultaneously within an online 360-degree dashboard, ensuring that all customer requests, actions and opportunities are contextual and holistic. Customers gain a single-view of their own tenancy, property and estate and can also view this when visited by their landlord's staff. Thus, they can discuss care issues with their own housing-officer or report an estate issue to a gas engineer. This cross-functional visibility negates the traditional view of organisational silos and boosts both efficiency and customer care.

Professional UX and UI

When housing systems were first developed, they were by an IT supplier for a housing provider – i.e. they were business-to-business (B2B). By contrast, self-service is business-to-consumer (B2C). Such systems only work properly if they are extremely easy-to-use. Consumers are quite knowledgeable today and they have high usability expectations. The failure to recognise this inhibits adoption and damages credibility.

At Aareon, we needed to get this right-first-time with best-practice technology. We needed to develop agile systems that housing providers could tailor to customers' needs. To this effect, we have partnered with digital agency Dootrix, widely acclaimed for their excellence in this field. Dootrix is working on the UX

GETTING TENANTS TO HELP THEMSELVES

Continued from previous page

and UI integrally deployed though our self-service systems.

Dootrix's agile development teams are expert, multi-discipline specialists who design and develop mobile, web and cloud applications. Through detailed analysis and prototyping, they use agile techniques to deliver truly intuitive and frictionless customer solutions.

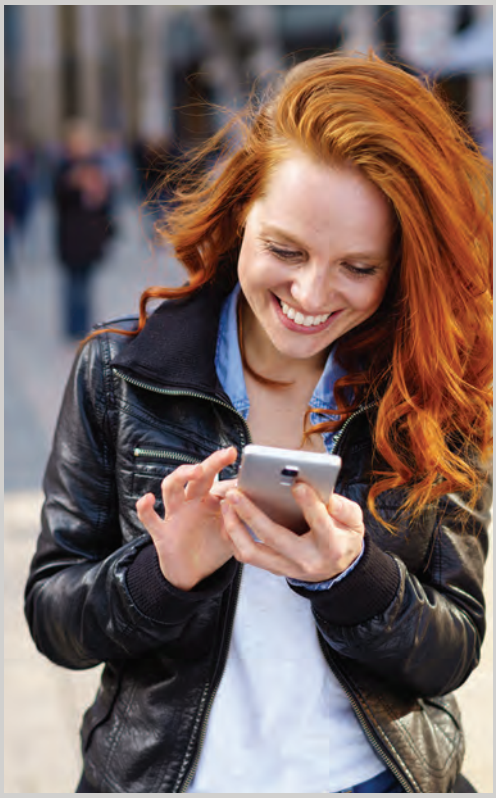
Dootrix's head of marketing Elliott King said, "The end-user hates clunky technology and appreciates intuitive alternatives. We add exactly that expertise to our clients' digital propositions. As one of the UK's leading suppliers of housing systems, Aareon's software represents top-flight integration and eloquent development, setting high standards across all aspects of their work including self-service."

The emergence of self-service at the operational heart of social housing customer management will certainly evolve further, delivering even more benefits to customers who need it most. This in itself is a worthy and valid outcome, but add in the efficiency savings and heightened value-for-money delivered through technology and the business case is complete.

Much of the success of self-service will be driven by inclusion and by fine-tuning the marketing campaigns used to persuade customers to adopt it. In a way though, by making the B2C interface so easy to use, the chances are that it ultimately could be customer demand itself leading housing providers to offer even more self-help.

This article is a shortened extract from a longer supplement from Aareon UK and Housing Technology on 'The art of getting customers to help themselves'; please email news@housing-technology.com if you would like to receive a copy of the supplement.

Geraint Griffiths is the managing director of Aareon UK.



ENGHOUSE SET TO STREAMLINE FLAGSHIP'S COMMUNICATIONS

Flagship Group is just about to implement a new system from Enghouse Interactive for its contact centre to pull all forms of tenant communications together in the same place. At the moment, the housing provider faces a conflict between the need to offer tenants more options for how they interact with Flagship and the disparate, siloed systems being used to handle the traffic.

The Enghouse Interactive platform will allow multiple channel customer contacts to be integrated. Contact centre staff will be logged onto different channels, so all interactions will appear on one screen. Regardless of whether it is telephone, email or live chat, they will receive the same level of priority.

Flagship said that it expected the new software to result in more efficient routing for reduced waiting times and fewer abandoned contacts, improved reporting and data analysis, seamless omni-channel service and greater productivity overall from its contact centre staff.

Matt Brazier, director of IT, Flagship Group, said, "We are really excited about introducing the new Enghouse communications platform. It means that we will be able to handle multiple communication channels from our customers more efficiently which in turn means they can do business with us however they want – face-to-face, by phone or digitally."

LOW CODE – EMPOWERING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FROM WITHIN

Simon Shepherd, Regional Director - Healthcare & Public Sector, OutSystems

When the government published its 'Government Transformation Strategy' in early 2017, its ambition was clear: to transform the relationship between citizens and the state by expanding the public sector's digital footprint so UK citizens could benefit from more streamlined, cost-effective, and responsive public services. The strategy is foundational to overcoming the increasing pressure on public services caused by an ageing population and a steadily shrinking pool of resources across all sectors, from healthcare and housing to law enforcement and local government.

The message was communicated in unequivocal terms – swift digital transformation is critical if the public sector is to meet its obligations to the UK public, and strong progress must be demonstrated by the target date of 2020. This urgency was recently underlined by the government's health secretary, Matt Hancock, who called for more healthcare apps to support health sector workers and patients. He understands that new applications can streamline processes and provide more personalised support for citizens.

Of course, setting bold targets is all very well, but the road to achieving them is far from straightforward. The public sector has a complex legacy technology environment that has grown organically over decades. Previous reform programmes have suffered high profile problems and, understandably, this has contributed to a fear of failure, resistance to change, and lack of ownership in the sector.

This is something we come across frequently in our work with public-sector organisations—they know they need to act and act soon, but they're acutely aware that previous strategies haven't worked.

Those strategies usually take one of two forms. First, there is the sticking plaster approach; the organisation identifies an improvement that can be made and looks for an external provider who can offer a quick-fix solution that works right now. The problem is that there can be a lack of strategic decision-making, and the solution is often incapable of growing with the organisation or integrating effectively with other services. Furthermore, the external provider holds all the cards, locking the organisation into software over which they have little control.

The second strategy has been to take a more expensive, strategic approach involving large consultancy firms who put multi-year programmes in place. These programmes can be inflexible given the pace of change in both technology and user expectations.

Neither approach, relying heavily on outside involvement, does much to help empower the internal teams who are working in the public sector. Projects proceed in silos, and there is a sense that change is being inflicted from the outside. Resistance naturally increases because the people who are working at the coalface of IT delivery have little sense of ownership.

Empowering the right people

To move public-sector digital transformation forward, agencies should empower in-house teams to take on and deliver transformational projects from start to finish. The result is a feeling of achievement as they roll out their own solutions to citizens and colleagues. This is crucial to effecting culture change and reducing the fear of failure that holds organisations back. Here are three key ways that a low-code development platform can help:

1. **Staffing:** Using low-code means organisations can build an agile team of existing staff rather than recruiting advanced developers in an employment market where such skills are priced at a premium or, in some places, are simply not available locally. This reduces the setup costs and creates immediate buy-in from teams who will have ownership of the app development projects.
2. **Ownership:** With a low-code platform such as OutSystems, the team has complete ownership of the software development lifecycle and is not locked into a supplier that will hold their assets for ransom at the end of a subscription period; the intellectual property remains with the organisation. Also, the beauty of the public sector is that organisations are not in competition with each other. This means that when one organisation overcomes an issue, that success can be shared through open standards, meaning the RoI for the public sector as a whole is increased.
3. **Risk and RoI:** Risk is lower when organisations develop apps with low-code, and RoI is higher. Development time is cut from months or years to just weeks, and apps are launched to market more successfully. This, in turn, creates more demand for apps and builds confidence in the team that delivers them.

Putting empowerment into practice: Worcestershire County Council

Worcestershire County Council aimed to achieve all this when it embarked on a comprehensive digital transformation programme powered by OutSystems. They used our low-code platform to create an agile development team of existing employees, and by the end of the first year they had delivered 53

LOW CODE – EMPOWERING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FROM WITHIN

Continued from previous page

apps for citizens and businesses, saving an estimated £1.6 million. Furthermore, they published all the apps under an open-source license. All other local authorities can share and reuse these apps, so Worcestershire County Council's investment is benefiting the whole local government sector.

One of the most powerful intangible outcomes from low-code adoption is that the team develops a belief in itself as it delivers each new app. We see this time and again with organisations that we work with. Often, at the start, they simply are not confident that they can deliver successful apps in-house. Once they find that they can, there is no stopping them. Momentum builds. It is this sense of empowerment that truly drives progress and helps organisations take ownership of their digital transformation journey – it's at least as important as the public money saved.

An updated transformation strategy

The ongoing challenges of digital transformation in the public sector have led the Government Digital Services department to issue an update to the initial programme, called the 'Local Digital Declaration'. This statement recognises many of the issues that I've already discussed. It commits to building digital public services around the needs of users, rather than being hamstrung by legacy technology or limited by organisational silos. It vows to 'fix the plumbing' by breaking the dependence on expensive, inflexible technology that doesn't join up (the sticking plasters mentioned earlier) and instead using open standards to ensure integration. Finally, it commits to creating a transparent and genuine culture of transformation and digital leadership throughout its working practices.

All of this absolutely aligns with the low-code ethos that we endorse here at OutSystems. The public sector should be empowered to drive its own digital projects. Employees should be proud of what they can achieve and the new ways in which they can achieve it. That's what real transformation means, and that's what low-code can deliver.

Simon Shepherd is the regional director for healthcare and the public sector at OutSystems.

Stonewater appoints Hallnet for tenant self-service

Stonewater has appointed website and software development consultancy Hallnet to deliver a digital self-service platform for its tenants, based on Hallnet's Active Housing system.

The appointment is part of Stonewater's digital investment to enhance customer experience, offer better connectivity and access, and enable tenants to engage with services at a time and place to suit them.

Karen Stephens, director of change, innovation and performance, Stonewater, said, "Hallnet's expertise in creating bespoke digital experiences matches our commitment to engage meaningfully with our customers and provide services that customers trust."

Torus residents on the alert with Housing Proactive

Torus has installed Alertacall's Housing Proactive system in 2,000 of its properties to help its older residents.

Individual Torus residents are typically given a phone with an 'OKEachDay' button on it. Residents press the OKEachDay button in their own time each day to demonstrate that everything is fine at their property. If the button isn't pressed, a specially-trained call centre is informed who enquire about the status of the property and can escalate any concerns to housing officers or family members.

By improving communication with residents, Torus now has access to detailed housing management information via online reporting from Housing Proactive, including accurate occupancy tracking, which makes it easier to schedule maintenance work and also contributes to fire safety and emergency planning.

Paula Underwood, head of support network, Torus, said, "Both the business and our tenants were quick to see the benefits of Housing Proactive and the OKEachDay button. Together with staff from our Staying Home Service, who use the messaging tool to broadcast news and updates, it gives our older residents real independence."

THE RIGHT APPROACH TO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Rodney Smith, Operations Director, OperaQuest

The world we live in is obsessed with information; although society is firmly in the 'information age', there is a tendency to collect data from every conceivable source and present it ad nauseum.

In business, the analysis of data can provide organisations with vital competitive advantage if – and only if – the resultant information is acted upon decisively and data not collected merely because it's the 'thing to do'.

Many off-the-shelf applications enable organisations to replicate legacy data collection methods (the ubiquitous paper-based form on a clipboard) with little or no analysis as to what is actually required to collect, analyse and present data in the current operational environment. Storage space is under constant pressure as paper records mount up and current requirements of transparency, such as GDPR, can present logistical issues and one can easily see the advantage of digitising records for ease of search purposes.

However, digital storage (cloud or on premise) can incur costs which, although often regarded as minimal at first, can quickly become significant unless managed properly. If the 'sticking plaster' approach is taken, our experience clearly indicates that clients are faced with ancillary issues, such as security concerns caused by random access, particularly for data that could have wide-reaching consequences (as in the case of GDPR-related data, for example).

A common knee-jerk reaction is to digitise for a single purpose in order to provide a sticking plaster for a specific issue, only to be replicated by the introduction of myriad systems reacting to the constantly occurring next flavour of the month.

The digital approach to data collection brings tremendous advantages in accuracy, complete transparency, and speed of data analysis and publication, both internally and externally. However, this sea change in data management can only be totally effective and efficient if the data collected is appropriate and relevant to the operational decision-makers, will be acted upon, and integrates with any existing management information systems.

It is our experience that an off-the-shelf app builder does provide a simple, cost-effective alternative to laborious paper-based systems, but it will only ever be a 'sticking plaster' response to entering the digital age unless an in-depth systems analysis of data requirements is objectively and clinically conducted. The advantage of an externally-based systems analysis eliminates the natural in-built bias to current procedures and the results can be transformative.

Over the years, there have been advocates for business processes to be constantly reviewed in the name of efficiency and cost reduction, but the digital transformation now available through advances in technology, and particularly connectivity, can provide the forward-thinking organisation with the opportunity for in-depth surgery on its core asset – data.

Rodney Smith is the operations director of OperaQuest.

LIVIN APP BOOSTS DIGITAL TRANSACTIONS

Livin has revamped its tenant portal and seen digital transactions soar. Over 25 per cent of its tenants are actively using the app, with at least 60 per cent of transactions now carried out digitally, delivering tenant satisfaction levels of 98 per cent.

Prior to the implementation of Housing Insight's Pan Connect portal and app, Livin's analytics showed that although many of its tenants were registered for its previous portal, only a small number were actually using it. Further user research showed that tenants wanted better mobile functionality and the option of an app to manage their tenancies.

Alan Boddy, director of operations, Livin, said, "Last year we launched our new business strategy 'Plan A' with an objective to relentlessly focus on our tenants, putting their needs at the heart of everything we do. Improving the customer experience through the exploitation of technology is a win-win scenario and we are already seeing the business benefits and improved tenant satisfaction."

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY
recruitment

PROMOTE YOUR JOB VACANCIES FOR FREE AND REACH HIGH-CALIBRE CANDIDATES WITH HOUSING TECHNOLOGY

- Dedicated job board for our sector
- 100% free with no payment gateways
- Post your vacancies on our easy-to-use website in a matter of minutes
- Receive applications directly from our large audience
- Feature in our monthly jobs email which is sent to 1000+ key professionals in the sector
- Jobs promoted frequently on social media

POST YOUR VACANCIES TODAY

VISIT
jobs.housing-technology.com

EMAIL
recruitment@housing-technology.com

TELEPHONE
0208 336 2293

FROM CONCERNED TO COMPLIANT

David Wilson, Operations Manager, Propeller

Is it possible to achieve 100 per cent compliance across all services without your already over-stretched budget taking a massive hit? Yes, says Dave Wilson, operations manager at Propeller.

If you were asked to prove your organisation was 100 per cent compliant across all services (gas, electricity, general repairs, fire and asbestos), how long would it take to identify, collate and analyse the data that will form your supporting evidence? Hours? Perhaps a day? If you use a range of standalone applications or spreadsheets, it could even take several days.

Recently, I spoke to a senior executive at one housing provider who'd managed an organisation-wide compliance audit just a few weeks before we met. Within hours of completing the audit, the business was no better informed on its current compliance status than it had been at the start of the process.

We know service provision on the scale conducted by housing providers up and down the country is hugely complex, subject to innumerable variables and is ever-changing and needs to be reflected in a more integrated and responsive approach to data management. While this provision needs to be effective and high-quality in order to meet statutory compliance requirements, it's equally important to provide tenants with a comfortable and safe living environment. But get it wrong just once and today's tenant is more likely to dish the dirt on social media than grumble in private.

Spending on repairs and maintenance by the UK's largest housing providers is rising, yet tenant satisfaction levels remained largely unchanged. Add that to the average time it takes for a repair (8.3 days) and the implication for both your budget and customer satisfaction is pretty huge.

While there is no simple answer, at least knowing exactly where you are is essential. Knowledge is the key to maintaining 100 per cent compliance, improving service quality and speed and saving money.

Your organisation already has the nuts and bolts of 'knowledge' in the massive amount of data that is generated and stored on a daily basis. But to paraphrase the old adage, it's not what you know, it's knowing what you know and putting it to use. For housing providers, that translates into making more effective use of this rich source of information.

That's why we developed Propeller, a unified management system designed to not only convert raw data into clear and relevant analysis and insights (knowledge) but also, crucially, to allow real-time access that's always accurate and available, anytime, anywhere to all stakeholders, from contractors and engineers, to administrators, senior managers and even clients. The kind of system which, as one customer put it, provides "one version of the truth" which is always completely up-to-date.

So, to go back to my original question, if you were asked to demonstrate your compliance status, all you'd have to do was refer to the nearest device – PC, tablet, phone – check the service and compliance dashboards and you'd have the answer within minutes.

David Wilson is the operations manager at Propeller.

MHS HOMES' ONLINE SERVICES FROM CLOUD DIALOGS

MHS Homes has introduced tenant self-service using a new digital platform from Cloud Dialogs. As well as tenants being able to book appointments with their housing officer and arrange repairs, MHS operatives can book additional visits and the software calculates travel times, so only the closest and most suitably skilled person is sent.

The service uses Cloud Dialogs, which combines order booking, SMS/email confirmation, scheduling and service delivery; these are then integrated with MHS Homes' housing management system.

Matt Eddy, business project manager of neighbourhood services, MHS Homes, said, "We've taken a very different approach to the mobile agenda; this is about us getting the nearest person with the right skills to fully complete customer tasks while they're out and about. We're redefining the traditional idea of a fixed housing officer for each patch and we can now optimise staff workloads and streamline processes.

"Before this project, a lot of the updates and communications from our housing team were very paper-based. But the need for printing is now significantly reduced because our staff can fill out, sign and submit forms and tenancy agreements on a smart phone, tablet or laptop."

Personal data and GDPR

ParaDPO's co-director Clifford Barton explains how GDPR is now part of our everyday existence (not that the Data Protection Act 2018 is beyond current thought), ranging from the curious tenant or the fractious employee wishing to exercise their rights over how their personal data is used, to the largest housing providers with a duty of care to look after and safeguard the rights of the people they provide for and work with.

Through GDPR, housing providers have very recently seen significant change, albeit imposed upon us. What was previously a nice-to-have is now a mandatory must-have; the rights of the natural person, client or employee must now be rigorously observed.

Personal data is not just about individuals' names, addresses, ethnicity, health details and unlawful transgressions; it is about information that can be used to identify a person either directly or by inference (more recently through metadata [data about data]).

There are now a multitude of requirements surrounding personal data usage, including the need to:

- Provide a reason for collection and why it is being processed;
- Determine how long it will be held for;
- Account for the data lifecycle and journey as it processes through an organisation (and potentially beyond to third parties);
- Identify what categories of data subject information are held;
- Provide a legal reason for collection and storage;
- Specify which data is special category or criminal;
- Describe what security arrangements are in place for the data.

Personal information is held under trust and we must exercise this trust from an empathetic perspective. We must always respect the rights of the data subject. But how do we treat mountains of personal data and make sense of it? Moreover, how do we treat personal data in the context of GDPR without losing sight of the wider legal landscape?

The ICO mandates the use of an information asset register for every organisation that holds and/or processes personal data, as such: 'maintain a record of processing activities under its responsibility'.

This translates into each organisation having to record what personal data is collected and how it is used. To this end, the ICO provides a couple of rudimentary templates for maintenance purposes though use of these is not mandatory. That said, each organisation is at liberty to record pertinent private data information in a manner suited to them as they see fit (provided it meets the above aim of an organisation holding a dynamic information asset list).

The ICO's spreadsheets are inelegant, cumbersome and are cost/labour intensive. These templates require significant ongoing input, a lot of management and a raft of training to keep staff aware of their GDPR obligations.

But surely, this can't be the answer (and not just because businesses are migrating away from spreadsheet use)? The answer and solution therefore is through a systematised and dedicated personal data audit application.

To keep track of swathes of data is an immense task. No set of spreadsheets could ever do it justice, especially for organisations that by necessity pass and process personal data to third parties (such as local authorities, Police, charities and other housing providers) on a daily basis.

Like most businesses today, housing providers are both data-reliant and data-subservient. Many are using the introduction of the GDPR as a lever for business change and transformation, in the bargain realising that efficiencies and economies of scale that can be introduced, with the addition of dedicated applications that make the management of data (both personal and operational) more controllable and accountable, especially pertinent in today's internal/external audit environment.

ParaDPO has considerable experience in personal data management and with GDPR implementations in the housing sector, and we understand the inadequacies and shortfalls of spreadsheet-style personal data solutions. The solution is therefore to manage personal data through a dedicated relational information asset database (ParaDPO's version of this is called Myriad) which can be interrogated and quizzed to provide a wide range of personal data information views for any organisation, not only as the ICO stipulates, but also to improve the general understanding on how personal data is distributed internally and externally by an organisation.

Clifford Barton is co-director of ParaDPO.

HOUSING & CARE 21 PARTNERS WITH APPELLO FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

By 2025, analogue telephony services will be switched off completely in the UK, presenting a challenge to providers and users of telecare services, such as personal alarms and pull cords.

As a telecare user, Housing & Care 21 realised that it would be uneconomical to continue to service, maintain or replace failing analogue telecare systems, so has begun a long-term plan to migrate to an all-digital service from Appello.

Housing & Care 21 and Appello have worked together to develop the LivingHub wall-mounted tablet to be used instead of traditional analogue systems, featuring room-to-room video calling, remote door-entry, direct access to onsite staff and faster connections to a monitoring centre (down from 90 seconds to just three seconds).

Over 100 Housing & Care 21 sites have now been migrated to digital with Appello's support, with a further 40 sites planned to be completed by March 2019 and the remaining developments to be completed ahead of the switchover in 2025.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Sticking plaster or in-depth surgery?

With digital transformation projects of all sizes, complexity and ambition being considered or undertaken by housing providers at the moment (see elsewhere in this issue), Housing Technology interviewed senior executives from Appello, Community Fibre, Comparex and Northgate Public Services around the theme of 'digital transformation - sticking plaster or in-depth surgery?'.

Does digital transformation require a complete rethink of IT and business operations?

Comparex's public sector director, Chris Bartlett, said, "An important barrier to overcome is 'legacy thinking'. Too often, digital initiatives are approached without considering the needs of either tenants or staff. When this happens, grassroots ideas are often killed in the weeds and projects become misaligned or poorly-defined.

"Often, housing providers are not asking the fundamental questions at the start, such as what are we trying to achieve, what is our strategy and how does technology help us achieve it, so that projects fail to deliver tangible benefits and IT teams lose confidence in embarking on bigger transformation projects."

"An important barrier to overcome is 'legacy thinking'. When this happens, grassroots ideas are often killed in the weeds and projects become misaligned or poorly-defined."

Chris Bartlett, Business Unit Director – Public Sector, Comparex

Roger Birkinshaw, housing director for Northgate Public Services, said, "Rather than honing in on individual business processes that are causing pain, the focus should be on getting the overall strategy behind digital transformation right from the start. That means looking at the customer journey from start to finish, what channels should be added, how you can staff new ways of working, and which (if any) channels you can switch off once transformation has taken place.

"An umbrella digital strategy provides focus and ensures you avoid a patchwork of short-term fixes that deliver only temporary efficiency gains and result in an assortment of IT solutions that further fragment your data."

Can a piecemeal approach work?

Community Fibre's CEO, Jeremy Chelot, said, "There used to be a time when a digital transformation team had to search for a 'killer app' that would drive sufficient savings to justify the large investment required to improve the underlying tenant connectivity issues. The best approach now is to consider the services that generate the greatest volume of offline work and investigate how they can be made available online.

"The demand from customers for well-designed digital channels can be surprising. For example, when Westminster City Council put its parking permit application process online, 97 per cent of the applications switched immediately to the online channel."

Comparex's Bartlett said, "Housing providers often look at digital transformation as being overly complex and daunting when considered in its entirety. For example, investigations into potential cloud migration and how it will change a provider's infrastructure can quickly spiral into worries about the integration of legacy IT, costs and data sovereignty, eventually leading to the project being shelved. A piecemeal approach could counteract this, as housing providers would have a clear vision of the specific benefit of each project being undertaken, instead of being bogged down by the bigger picture, with no clear start or end in sight."

"In terms of technology, having an open architecture is essential. It lets you add services and applications as your strategy is rolled out and still ensure that data is brought into the centre."

Roger Birkinshaw, Housing Director, Northgate Public Services

What are the 'quick wins'?

Northgate Public Services' Birkinshaw said, "Look at which processes eat up a lot of staff time and what take tenants a lot of time too; the temptation is to focus only on those processes that consume staff time, but if the solution is too focused on one side at the expense

of the other, it won't deliver true digital transformation.

"For instance, moving repair reporting online may make life for the housing provider, but if the online process is too laborious for the tenants, they will still contact the call centre to report a fault. A solution that delivers for both parties will encourage true channel shift to take place."

"There was a time when the digital transformation team simply had to search for a 'killer app'. The best approach now is to consider the online services that remove the greatest volume of offline work."

Jeremy Chelot, CEO, Community Fibre

Community Fibre's Chelot's said, "Improving the digital connectivity and skills of your customers not only unlocks their willingness to interact with you online, but also provides them with untold benefits and opportunities. For example, Community Fibre provides a free gigabit connection for community spaces such as public libraries and schools, so one 'quick win' is grant Community Fibre permission to install our fibre-optic cables within your estates."

What's really important?

Northgate Public Services' Birkinshaw said, "Digital transformation needs to be realistic and achievable. It's not just about what budgets are available, but also what return there will be for any changes made. While it might be a nice idea to move some less-used services online or offer extra contact options via Twitter and Facebook, if the cost to maintain the new options outweighs the efficiency savings or the expected improvement in KPIs, then perhaps your focus should be elsewhere.

"In terms of technology, having an open architecture is essential. It lets you add services and applications as your strategy is rolled out and still ensure that data is brought into the centre. If an enquiry is dealt with on Facebook, Twitter or a tenant app, the transaction needs to be visible in the CRM record for that tenant and that can only happen with the right IT strategy laid out from the beginning."

Measuring success

Appello's CTO, Carl Atkey, said, "The significant advantage of digital over non-digital systems is the level of data and insight that becomes available. The data we've been able to provide has enabled our housing customers to look at their operations with quantitative evidence and change processes to support their staff to deliver better services to residents."

"The significant advantage of digital over non-digital systems is the level of data and insight that becomes available."

Carl Atkey, CTO, Appello

Community Fibre's Chelot said, "Measuring the success of digital transformation can take many guises, but the best measure of success is tenant feedback and satisfaction. Having a good understanding of the experiences of your tenants is vital to address any issues that may arise in the future, and to see how your digital services are positively affecting your tenants."

Housing Technology would like to thank Carl Atkey (Appello), Jeremy Chelot (Community Fibre), Chris Bartlett (Comparex) and Roger Birkinshaw (Northgate Public Services) for their editorial contributions to this article.

A DAY IN THE LIFE... AT STRATIS SECURITY

George Schaar, Head of Research & Development, Stratis Security

I've worked in security for more than 20 years, protecting the homes of celebrities and the rich as well as developing technology to secure homes and housing estates from Ipswich to Ireland.

For the past three years, I've been working with our specialist team from our technology innovation base in Suffolk. There really is a melting pot of the latest smart homes and internet of things solutions here, with other companies such as Facebook, Cisco and Nokia also on the same site. My current focus is progressing the development of a secure app which allows clients to monitor camera surveillance in their properties remotely. Clients can also get alarms alerting them on their phones if windows or doors have been broken or tampered with.

Fingerprint and facial recognition

Our solutions include fingerprint identification technology, which is non-intrusive, fast and efficient and can secure large areas over many levels. For example, entrances and exit points to lifts and stairwells, through to individual rooms, cupboards and flats. Stratis has also developed facial recognition for entry systems, with our cameras scanning the iris and matching faces from a pre-stored database of images. Used in conjunction with video surveillance, we have significantly tightened security and improved accountability at a major residential block in Ipswich, where residents now show their faces at the front entrance to gain entry. I never thought I'd be implementing technology that first inspired me from Blade Runner in the early 80s!

We have also helped combat a range of issues at two blocks of flats in Ipswich, including rats in ground floor bin-stores as a result of fly-tipping, as well as graffiti and non-residents, who would gather outside and in reception areas, gaining access to the blocks and moving freely around the building. In one of the blocks, we installed facial recognition cameras and key fobs, with card access to lifts and stairwells, making it possible to prohibit access as well as track individuals and only allow access to designated areas.

Social housing applications

For social housing providers, our technologies have many applications, such as if a tenant has lost or forgotten their key, or for vulnerable residents in extra-care schemes or sheltered accommodation, allowing their relatives, friends or carers to gain access. We were at the CIH conference in Manchester earlier this year and are now talking with a range of housing providers about how to deploy our solutions as part of their business transformation programmes and their wider smart home and internet of things strategies.

Lasers

No longer being the exclusive province of science fiction, long-range lasers are an effective and flexible way to monitor and protect your property. Lasers can be set up as an invisible fence around an office, for example, or in areas that are targeted for high-value materials, such as a church roof or to protect copper piping. Any tampering to the laser triggers an alert, which is sent back as a high-quality audio file that can be monitored remotely.

Destruction day

My team and I are currently working towards ISO accreditations. With the impact of the Grenfell tragedy, we have also developed fire safety and reinforced doors. At the time of writing, we are arranging a 'destruction day' on September 26 at our base in Martlesham Heath in Suffolk where we have challenged the 4,000 staff at Adastral Park (home also of BT's innovation centre) and invited them to break through our reinforced doors with sledge hammers, angle grinders and cordless drills. So confident are we of the resilience of our reinforced doors, we have also invited Britain's strongest man, Eddie Hall, along to pit his strength against our doors.

George Schaar is the head of research and development at Stratis Security.

THRIVE HOMES' DIGITAL SERVICES FROM GCI & SKYPE

GCI has won a contract to support Thrive Homes' agile working and transformation of its customer experience with more omni-channel services and mobile working.

GCI is implementing Skype for Business and GCI's Cloud Contact Centre for seamless communication and collaboration between teams, new channels of communication for customers and real-time reporting. GCI will also provide its Skype for Business-based e-learning and analytics tools, UCversity and UC Analytics, for Thrive's staff via videos and online training courses.

John Stenton, IT manager, Thrive Homes, said, "Finding a partner who understood the important role digital communication plays in enabling Thrive to provide secure, affordable housing in an efficient, modern way, was critical. GCI demonstrated this ability throughout the tender process by providing a solution that would allow us to offer new channels of communication to our customers, empower our employees to work remotely and improve service delivery."

THE OPPORTUNITY IN HOUSING ENERGY

Matthew Roderick, Founder, n3rgy

Across Great Britain, smart energy meters are being installed in every home to start the digital transformation of the way we consume energy. As with other sectors before, such as music, films and more recently financial services, the digitisation of a market significantly changes it, introducing opportunities for new services, players and transformed customer experiences.

Britain's energy market today is in excess of £30 billion for domestic supply, an average of over £1,000 per year for a typical property. Small houses and flats aren't much better off, paying more than £700 per year and, as we've seen over recent years, these costs will continue to rise. Furthermore, people on lower incomes often find themselves using prepaid meters that can restrict their choice of energy tariffs, cost substantially more for the same energy consumed and have the inconvenience of having to frequently top up their credit at local shops.

This situation is changing and the introduction of smart meters will allow consumers, in real time, to understand their energy usage and spending. They will also introduce greater parity between prepaid and post-pay costs (in the same way as pay-as-you-go mobile phones did in the 1990s), making it far easier to identify better deals, change energy supplier and provide greater convenience. Probably most importantly, the meters will also enable the basic infrastructure for consumers and communities to generate and trade energy with each other and the electricity grid. This creates the opportunity to not only consume energy at 'cost' prices but also to generate revenue from energy that isn't consumed locally.

Over the past few years, there have been a number of examples to deploy energy generation and storage capabilities into communities. As centralised energy prices continue to rise and sustainable generation and storage equipment costs fall, there is a growing opportunity for consumers and communities to purchase the equipment needed to generate their own energy at a fraction of the current cost. Also the energy market regulator and the national grid have created and are creating further mechanisms for communities to sell their excess energy back to the grid and to more efficiently buy energy when local generation is not sufficient.

This market is at the beginning of a significant growth cycle. In 2017, the government announced the transition away from fossil fuel- to electricity-based transport by 2040 and it is expected that transitioning away from natural gas-based domestic heating is likely to be the next major policy move. These things together will more than triple a typical home's consumption of electricity, creating even more demand for community-based generation to sustainably benefit both landlords and tenants.

With this growing market in mind, energy management should become a business priority for your organisation. The following are some basic priorities you should start to consider:

Minimising and optimising consumption

The easiest way to reduce energy costs is to consume less, therefore appropriate levels of insulation and energy-efficiency technologies should be considered as part of your on-going maintenance regime. Consider the government schemes around energy efficiency and look to include other improvements (wall and roof insulation, LED lighting, automatic timers & PIR sensors and high-efficiency white goods).

Energy communities to avoid building margin on margin

There are a number of white-label businesses that can help you create an energy community that can sell energy to your tenants and generate revenue by selling back to the grid. Many of these are in their infancy but the business model has been proven to be both viable and sustainable. Through these models, you and your tenants start to avoid the 'margin on margin' problem that is pervasive within the complex supply chains of the national energy suppliers.

Generation and storage facilities within your estate

Time-of-use tariffs will become the norm and therefore your ability to generate and store energy can significantly offset your and your tenants' energy costs at peak times. Asset costs have dramatically fallen and continue to do so, creating in some areas an RoI within 2-3 years on an asset with an operational life of 10-15 years.

Matthew Roderick is founder of n3rgy.

IS HOUSING WARMING UP TO SMART CONTROLS?

Nigel Ebdon, Market Development Manager, Secure Meters UK

With over four million meters installed in the UK, multi-national manufacturer and supplier Secure Meters has a 30-year reputation of helping social housing customers better measure and manage their energy use.

Our latest commitment to innovation has seen the business make a long-term investment in internet of things (IoT) solutions, and our plan is to work with landlords to develop a series of new connected homes products over the coming years.

Looking back, the term 'internet of things' was first credited over 20 years ago to American Kevin Ashton in a presentation to Procter & Gamble in 1999. During the presentation, Ashton said, "If we had computers that knew everything there was to know about things, using data they gathered without any help from us, we would be able to track and count everything, and greatly reduce waste, loss and cost."

Although in this instance Ashton was mainly talking about fast-moving consumer goods, it didn't take long before manufacturers recognised the value of IoT to the property market. The potential of IoT in social housing can at times feel almost limitless, which poses both an exciting and slightly daunting question: where do we start?

It has been interesting to witness that once housing professionals understand the basic concept of home sensor technology, they are alive with ideas about how to deploy it. But the question isn't necessarily what is possible from a technical perspective, but what can deliver the right measurable financial and social returns on investment?

Connectivity and bandwidth are the key elements to bring IoT solutions to life. Relying on tenants to supply wireless connectivity isn't a viable long-term solution, and we need to get homes

connected to the web both for the benefit of tenants and the landlords.

And there lies the huge potential of IoT in social housing: dual landlord and tenant benefits. Tenants benefit from greater control, improved service and a more responsive, better-informed landlord. And on the other hand, landlords can make better, evidenced-based decisions, improve service delivery and efficiency, and better manage their property assets.

Although Secure Meters plans to eventually deliver a range of IoT solutions covering energy, tenant health, safety and welfare and asset management, we decided to start with our strengths and launch a smart heat control product called Beanbag. As with any new solution, we wanted to better understand market expectations and need, so earlier this year we commissioned a broad survey of UK social asset, sustainability and energy managers.

Below are the results of three of the key questions asked, along with reaction from Southern Housing Group's senior home energy advisor, Patryk Szczerba (Southern Housing has been assessing a 20-home Beanbag smart heat control pilot installation over recent months).

What are the most important benefits of smart heat controls?

Interestingly, at a time when cost and efficiency savings are perceived to be the highest priority for housing providers, it was tenant support and welfare-related benefits that came out on top, in particular reducing bills and tackling fuel poverty.

Southern Housing's Patryk Szczerba said, "Although it's the asset management value of smart heat controls that could potentially save landlords significant money over time, the most obvious upfront benefit is reducing tenants' fuel bills.

"This is the starting point for many landlords: can the cost of heat be reduced without compromising the quality of warmth in the home? If the answer to this is yes, then it's a massive tick in the box."

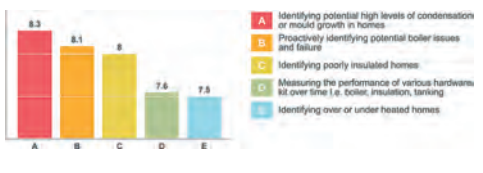
What are the asset management benefits of smart heat controls?

We have been long aware of the damaging impact of humidity and subsequent mould growth, and Secure Meters has recently partnered with the University of Southampton's faculty of engineering and environment to better understand the problem.

Szczerba said, "Mould growth is an expensive, perennial and ongoing problem. There are health implications for tenants exposed to mould growth for prolonged periods of time, including nasal lung conditions, asthma and allergies in children. Removing and stopping mould growth isn't always a simple process and often requires a combination of tradespeople and services to fix it. This can include the complaints team, housing managers, surveyors and contractors. In the

IS HOUSING WARMING UP TO SMART CONTROLS?

Continued from previous page

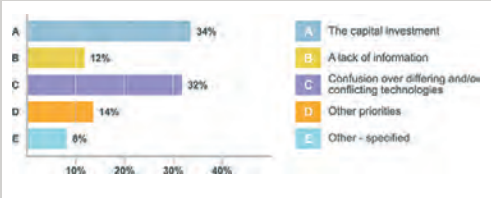


meantime tenants may have to be rehoused. It all mounts up.

"Smart heat controls should be able to help in a number of ways. Firstly, they can alert us to the homes with problematic levels of humidity, allowing us to take preventative action before mould growth takes hold. Secondly, it should provide my team with the information needed to have an informed conversation with the tenant. If we can see that humidity is spiking at say meal or shower times, we can suggest ventilating the bathroom or putting lids on pans."

What are the main barriers to the adoption of smart heat controls?

The two main barriers to adoption identified are the upfront capital investment needed and confusion over various technologies. The issue of capex isn't a surprise, and in our experience landlords would rather spread the cost by paying monthly for managed services, with guarantees that products will be maintained and kept up-to-date as part of any contracts. With solutions evolving so quickly, you can understand why landlords are anxious to avoid purchasing 'yesterday's technology'.



Szczerba said, "Smart heat controls should provide ongoing financial, environmental and social benefits, and this return should be balanced against upfront costs. However, keeping upfront capital costs as low as possible definitely makes purchasing easier.

"There are a lot of different connected home technologies out there from a growing number of suppliers, and in an ideal world they would all be able to integrate and work together, but landlords understand that's never going to be the case. As well as conducting their own trials to test and compare various new technologies, landlords are also sharing pilot and installation data. This should prove reassuring to landlords and speed up the mass adoption of the right solutions."

For the full smart heat technology market intelligence report please visit www.yumpu.com and search for 'smart heat technology'.

Nigel Ebdon is the market development manager at Secure Meters UK Ltd.

Q-Bot robots win eco-award

Q-Bot has won the 2018 Ashden Award for UK sustainable buildings following its innovative use of robots to insulate suspended floors.

When insulating a house, treating cavity walls and lofts are relatively easy. For properties with suspended floors, a quarter of the heat loss can be through the floor. Traditional methods of insulating suspended floors usually involve removing the floorboards to fit insulation between the joists, which takes at least a week and still leaves draughts due to gaps around the insulation boards.

Q-Bot has solved this problem through robotics. The company has developed a robot that can be inserted into the under-floor void through a small hole in the floorboards or through an exterior wall. The robot carries out a detailed survey and then insulates the suspended floors from below with quick-setting expanding foam insulation. Q-Bot robots use cameras and lasers to create a 3-D map of the underfloor area, which verifies that the installation has been successful.

Q-Bot has already worked with housing providers in Islington, Camden and Newcastle and plans to expand this work across the UK. Its approach is to train housing providers' own staff or their maintenance contractors to insulate homes themselves using the Q-Bot robots.

Q-Bot robots have insulated 265 homes so far; the company has a goal of insulating 1,000 homes by the end of March 2019.

INTELLIGENT CONNECTIVITY – NOT A JUST A PIPE DREAM

Philip Brunkard, CIO for Regional Government & Health, BT

As BT launches its Intelligent Connectivity future networks proposition to the market, a number of my CIO customers across the housing sector have asked me how this is relevant for them. Why would more investment in the network underpin any digital transformation plans to achieve a smarter digital future?

On the one hand, procurement frameworks are typically driving networks to the lowest common denominator (i.e. cheaper price). This is a view of the network as a commodity – effectively (or I should say ineffectively) treating the network as a dumb pipe or just the string that joins your tin together.

But those of us in IT know this is missing the point because the network in its traditional form is becoming increasingly complex to manage securely and reliably. This is further compounded as many housing providers continue to merge their business, and hence their IT infrastructure, and continue to battle to keep pace with the rate of digital change and the non-stop and growing security threats from hackers.

Software defined networks (SDN) and network function virtualisation (NFV) capabilities are now starting to mature as service offerings, enabling much greater control, flexibility and visibility across not just the organisation's network but across all IT service layers such as applications and security. This is what makes connectivity intelligent.

Housing providers have coped well in the face of continuing change yet still face many challenges as they digitally transform their services. Technology continues to offer lots of opportunity; for example, digital disruption, artificial intelligence and robotics have great potential to transform tenant services. But housing providers will need resilience, agility and new capabilities to grasp the technology's potential. In the long-term, digital and innovation plans will need to include intelligent connectivity to achieve their potential.

Although housing providers continue to move services to the cloud and social media as well as adopt mobile solutions to achieve cost efficiencies and improve frontline services for tenants, there are significantly more opportunities that emerging digital technologies can offer to further transform services.

Cloud adoption, use of the internet for local network traffic breakout and flexible working from any location is eroding the traditional network security perimeter, turning the traditional security model on its head. Staff are increasingly mobile, connecting across different networks (wireless, cellular and fixed) to access the applications (cloud or enterprise) to deliver frontline services. They need reliable, secure and a high-quality level of performance from their IT while delivering those services. Visibility across the entire hybrid enterprise network, as well as connected device traffic, is now critical in defending the organisation's systems and information from hackers. A more agile and controlled security implemented in software is a key benefit of SDN.

Housing providers need resilient, agile capabilities to achieve their digital potential and a smarter digital future. So why wouldn't they want to manage their connectivity intelligently to achieve this?

Intelligent connectivity promises a software-defined network with better control, increased flexibility, more visibility and enhanced security. So that has to be a good thing, doesn't it?

The volume of data flooding any organisation's network will continue to grow. Cloud services, more complex AI-driven applications, rich content and the onslaught of big data will put even more demands on the network. This trend is only set to accelerate as software increasingly automates more of our work and personal lives. And we shouldn't forget the promise of the internet of things to enable remote property management and tenant care services. Further digital disruption means there will be even more bandwidth-hungry technologies on the horizon, from augmented and virtual reality to autonomous vehicles, to cryptocurrencies and beyond.

So the network is not and can't afford to be considered a dumb pipe. All this digital onslaught and disruption means that even greater visibility, control and security with the flexibility to manage the complex mesh of data and applications will be critical.

But when does the shift to intelligent connectivity make sense for a housing provider and how does the business case stack up?

In reality, housing providers are more likely to be followers than leading edge when it comes to the majority of their ICT infrastructure investments. While I don't expect the move to intelligent or software-defined (SD) connectivity to be any different, what does need to be different is to include it as another technology enabler such as cloud, big data and mobile when it comes to evaluating and planning how digital can transform services.

I think it clearly makes sense to plan to be SD ready – make sure that artificial is not the only intelligence that you're thinking of when it comes to optimising services but connectivity is considered too.

Housing providers should plan their intelligent connectivity roadmap as part of their digital journey. This will likely be linked to clear digital milestones or compelling events such as equipment end-of-life refreshes or managed network services contract terminations and re-lets. When retendering a network services contract, the CIO should stipulate for a clear SDN implementation plan, appropriate architecture and managed service wrap.

The plan should be aligned to the organisation's own digital maturity and overall digital roadmap for cloud, big data and other digital enablers.

The architecture should ensure that the network topology is optimised in proportion to scale, complexity and affordability. In short, the business case needs to stack up. For example, it's likely to make sense to have a software-defined network overlay

INTELLIGENT CONNECTIVITY – NOT A JUST A PIPE DREAM

Continued from previous page

across 10Gb fibre-connected data centre and HQ sites but this may be overkill for branch sites where a cheaper consumer-grade broadband service is more suitable, affordable and balanced against application performance and security risk expectations.

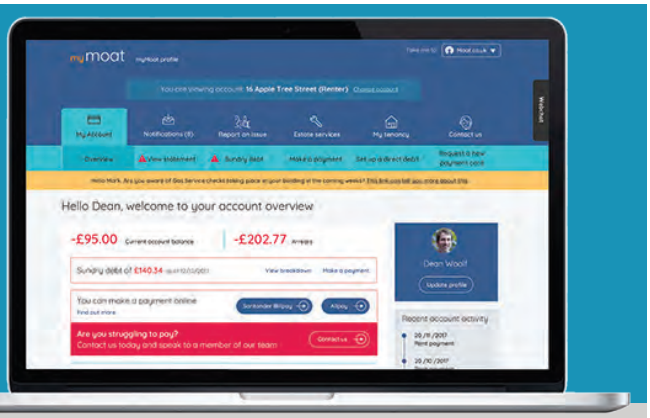
A key differentiator for software-defined networks is that the organisation will get enhanced insight, visibility and control of application performance, data-traffic management and security access to get the most out of the network. And because the software is implemented virtually, the network is now easier to manage (via a self-service portal) despite the increased broader digital complexity.

Often, many organisations are not confident of having the capabilities necessary to keep pace with the rate of technological change, obsolescence risks and the complexity of implementation. This makes it difficult to maximise the potential of digital transformation.

Intelligent connectivity can make the difference. The software-defined network will enable new applications and digital technologies to be deployed within shorter timeframes. Network changes can be achieved within weeks and even reduced to just days via drag-and-drop tools. This means the network is now a key enabler for agile software delivery, not a barrier. This should be a key part of the managed-service wrap requirements. So in essence, intelligent connectivity is very relevant to a housing provider's digital transformation agenda. However, it's about timing, it's about appropriateness to the business architecture and needs, and it's about the viability of the business case to achieve the benefits. But it's not just a pipe dream.

Philip Brunkard is CIO for regional government and health at BT.

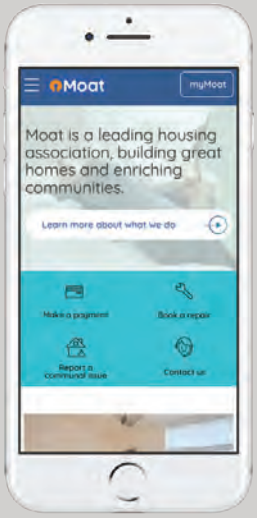
MOAT GOES DIGITAL WITH RACKSPACE & ORM



Moat has reported on its digital transformation programme, which started last year, with the help of infrastructure provider Rackspace and digital consultancy ORM.

The process started by looking at Moat's long-term vision and business objectives, in tandem with customer needs and behaviours, to design a solution that fulfilled those customer needs while delivering tangible business benefits.

ORM and Moat worked in collaboration throughout the process, with ORM's strategy, design and technical consultants working with Moat's in-house teams. Many of the ORM team worked alongside Moat at their Kent headquarters during key phases. This



meant the combined team could work together in an agile way, with quick engagement and decision-making from key stakeholders to maintain momentum and broad business buy-in. This close collaboration and co-creation also supported Moat in up-skilling their teams in key areas, including agile working practices, content management and new technology platforms.

Early indications show the customer portal is already driving efficiencies, with an exponential increase in the number of customers choosing to make payments and log repairs via the site since its launch. Furthermore, since the site launched, mobile traffic has increased, with more than half of all visits now taking place via mobile devices.

ORM also defined a long term technical architecture, including supporting licensing agreements and providing training and support for services from Rackspace and Sitecore.

Moat's website has been re-platformed on Sitecore 9.0. The infrastructure for the website and the My Moat portal is hosted on Azure PaaS, with Rackspace providing the onboarding for this and its Navigator service, where Moat has around-the-clock access to Rackspace's Microsoft Azure-certified architects and engineers, plus the tools and automation to run Azure according to Rackspace's best practices.

BIG OR SMALL – HOW TO DO MOBILE WORKING

David Critchley, Regional Director, UK & Ireland, MobileIron

What is the future of mobile working?
Mobile working can help housing providers deliver a more engaging, customer-centric service based on the principles of convenience and self-service. For example, mobile technology can reduce the amount of time tenants are left waiting for repairs and home improvements, by giving workers the ability to diagnose tenants' problems remotely, and then calling for the required professional assistance. In addition, mobile also has the potential to improve payment methods, with mobile devices being able to be used as POS systems. Mobile working could also drastically improve housing providers' internal operations by providing workers with a more effective communications channel.

All three of these possible applications have the potential to increase the efficiency, and productivity of housing providers' staff while also working to increase tenant satisfaction levels, and thus having reputational benefits for the provider.

What are the benefits of employee-owned mobile devices (BYOD) vs. dedicated devices?
Enabling employees to use their own mobile devices has a number of primary benefits, both for the employee and the organisation. In terms of employee benefits, BYOD (bring your own device) enables worker flexibility, giving them the opportunity to interchange between working remotely, and within their organisation with great ease, again allowing for gains in both efficiency and productivity. Recent figures indicate that the average employee can save 80 minutes per week in productivity by using a personal device at work. Similarly, allowing employees to use devices they are already familiar with can help organisations become more agile, by reducing the amount of time needed to issue new devices and applications.

However, perhaps most importantly, the main benefit of using employee-owned devices would be that it can help housing providers cut costs. Market statistics indicate that enabling employees to use their own mobile device at work could save businesses up to £1,000 per employee per year, with those savings then redistributed to other areas.

Yet, as in any other sector where employees can use their own devices, the issue lies in how these devices are secured. Allowing a privately-owned device the ability to connect to a corporate network immediately raises concerns for the business, with the possibility being that malware on the device may spread to the company servers. On the flipside, employees using their own devices for work may want guarantees that any productivity monitoring tools in place aren't going to steal their sensitive data and share it with their bosses.

As a result, housing providers need to make decisions regarding the extent to which individuals are allowed to have their own information available on devices, whether this means shutting devices off completely so that they run in 'kiosk mode' or only allowing certain applications to run.

How can housing providers make better use of mobile devices?
It is crucial that housing providers wanting to make better use of mobile devices ensure they are easy to use. Improving mobile device usage is driven by the user experience, and as a result housing providers should focus their efforts on making sure their mobile devices are easy to deploy, and that the installed applications are easy to access and easy to use. For example, apps such as MobileIron's Mobile Threat Defense work in background mode; once the application has been downloaded to a device, the user doesn't need to take any further action to activate the application. The user can then use their own device from anywhere, safe in the knowledge they are not putting corporate data at risk. Making sure the user experience isn't too complex is key to fulfilling the potential of mobile devices.

For housing providers that are too small and/or slow to adopt mobile devices, why and how should they move to mobile?
The benefits of adopting mobile devices are irrespective to a housing provider's size. For those that have been too slow to adopt mobile devices, it is probably due to either a lack of in-house expertise or a failure to realise the potential business value of adopting mobile devices. In either case, these organisations should engage with a trusted partner – somebody that understands the housing market, understands the technology and, most importantly, understands the organisation's specific goals.

Even for those organisations that may be better placed to adopt mobile devices, partnerships can be extremely valuable. By enhancing and supplementing in-house knowledge, partnerships can save housing providers time and money, making them more agile, and as a result making them better equipped to adapt to whatever comes next.

BIG OR SMALL – HOW TO DO MOBILE WORKING

Continued from previous page

How can housing providers better integrate mobile into internal business operations and external tenant activities?

It's important that housing providers acknowledge the 'future of work' – the convergence of people, processes and technology. Therefore the best way to fully integrate mobile technology would be to use the technology, and ensure that employees understand not only how to use the technology but also the benefits of using the technology.

Once organisations have thoroughly integrated mobile into their internal business operations, the process of integrating it into their external tenant activities should be relatively painless. Much in the same way that in a hospital, a doctor or nurse would update a patient's case in a way that is clearly visible in real time for the patient, housing providers can use mobile to keep tenants up-to-date on their case, subsequently enabling the tenant to see that the organisation is leveraging the technology with their best interests in mind.

What are the cultural challenges of mobile in housing?

The greatest challenges are based around a phobia of using the technology. This may be in a literal sense, with people being wary of using expensive devices in vulnerable areas, or it may be that the culture of the people being charged with using the devices is not particularly 'tech savvy'. In fact, a recent survey found that the greatest barriers to digital inclusion in social housing were a lack of motivation among tenants about going online, and limited resources on the housing providers' side to set up, manage and provide training for digital platforms.

The key to tackling these problems lies with making sure mobile services are easy to use, to the point that they become the preferred channel of communication for tenants. While for housing providers, it's imperative that they provide training for their staff to use mobile devices, and that they trial the technology to the extent that both tenants and staff can see the benefits of going mobile.

David Critchley is the regional director for the UK & Ireland at MobileIron.

Ottawa Community Housing takes Kirona for mobile repairs

Ottawa Community Housing Corporation, the fourth largest social housing provider in Canada, is set to introduce dynamic resource scheduling and mobile working with the introduction of Kirona's DRS and Job Manager software packages to replace their legacy systems.

The contract is 130 Kirona DRS licences to cover Ottawa Community Housing's entire repairs and maintenance team, with the software expected to be in use by March 2019. The housing provider is also considering the introduction of Kirona's InfoSuite software for field workforce analytics and reporting after the initial implementation.

Michael Wilson, interim VP of organisational effectiveness, Ottawa Community Housing, said, "We were impressed with Kirona's seamless integration and functionality. We can create a scalable solution that can handle every aspect of the repair jobs and management of our operatives, as well as provide the associated analytics to inform future developments."

GAS TAG BUYS MORGAN LAMBERT

Gas Tag has bought gas compliance consultants Morgan Lambert, with the aim of creating a "multi-disciplinary compliance consultancy" for social housing.

The acquisition is for the Millington Lord Group, which includes Morgan Lambert, who work with social landlords to provide gas and electrical auditing and safety management consultancy, as well as Qualitas Compliance, which provides similar services to the private sector. Gas Tag is a leading 'reg-tech' company whose technology has been developed to enable housing providers to meet their gas safety and associated regulatory requirements.

George Dutton, CFO, Gas Tag, said, "We are very excited about this acquisition. It's a fantastic opportunity which will help us to achieve our vision of making the UK the safest country in the world.

"Morgan Lambert and Qualitas Compliance have a significant amount of knowledge and experience as well as a long list of customers who put gas safety at the heart of everything they do. The complementary nature of our businesses will allow for seamless integration across our operations; creating a significant and unique offering to our customers."

At the start of 2018, private equity company Waterland acquired a minority stake in Gas Tag, valuing it at over £20 million.

STOCKPORT HOMES AIMS TO SWEEPUP ITS ESTATES

(L-R): Steve Moffatt, Caretaking Team Leader, with John Chambers, Head of IT, Stockport Homes, and Glyn Cunnah, Sales Director, Housing Support Pro

Stockport Homes is one of the first UK housing providers to use Housing Support Pro's new SweepUp software to maintain its estates.

SweepUp includes problem reporting by tenants, notifications and detailed instructions to caretakers, time tracking and job scheduling, single 'tap' sign in on mobile devices, inventory and supply management, post-inspection reviews, and real-time and historic performance reporting.

John Chambers, head of IT, Stockport Homes, said, "SweepUp's functionality complements our existing high standards. We have been very impressed with SweepUp's added value functions and in particular how easy it is for users to use. This solution addresses many of the day-to-day frustrations users and managers have had with legacy manual processes.

"There is also potential to apply SweepUp to other parts of our operations, where routine assessments need to be carried out and real-time visibility of issues can be reported and addressed."

Steve Lamb, ICT director, Housing Support Pro, said, "We are pleased to be working with Stockport Homes as we believe that SweepUp has the ability to help improve their facilities management and all for just £3 per month per user."

GENERAL NEWS

ROCC PARTNERS WITH PURRMETRIX

ROCC, developers of the widely-used Uniclass housing software, has announced a partnership with IoT supplier Purrmetrix.

The partnership is expected to form the foundation for a series of smart-home solutions to monitor the environment and condition of housing providers' properties using Purrmetrix's low-cost IoT sensors, with the sensors automatically reporting temperature, humidity or carbon dioxide issues within properties to the ROCC back-office housing maintenance and repairs system. The system can then be configured to automatically raise and prioritise these issues, enabling them to be handed off to mobile operatives to attend and resolve the issues.

Peter Luck, director of operations (Uniclass), ROCC, said, "Getting a better picture of the real-time environment not only helps allocate responsive repairs where they are most needed, but also lets housing providers get a better picture of which housing stock needs upgrading."

FORVIVA SCRAPS APPRAISALS FOR REAL-TIME MHR CHECK-INS

ForViva has replaced its annual appraisal process with 'continuous conversations' supported by real-time 'check-ins' using an application from HR and payroll software supplier MHR.

ForViva decided to remove its employees' annual appraisals and interim reviews because they were proving costly both in terms of time and resource while areas for the employees' improvement were typically based on their past performance rather than forward-looking conversations.

Check-Ins, part of MHR's iTrent software, provides a real-time platform for staff and their managers at ForViva to choose the frequency and format of conversations about performance, job satisfaction and personal wellbeing, enabling issues to be identified and addressed early and with feedback continually tied to corporate and individual goals. More frequent conversations and 'check-ins' will help managers drive employee engagement and motivation, and eliminate 'flight risk' by identifying demotivated people as early as possible.

Debbie Attwood, group director of people, ForViva, said, "We're excited about the implementation of Check-Ins, and the savings and efficiencies it will generate. Our old PDR process created a mountain of paperwork, ate up valuable time, and was more of a box-ticking exercise rather than a meaningful conversation with employees about their performance and nurturing their development, both of which are essential for our long-term future.

"Switching to Check-Ins will save hundreds of hours in administrative time and address performance in real-time rather than retrospectively. Employees will now have a minimum of six check-ins per year, meaning they will always be working towards clearly-defined goals."

GEARING UP FOR HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2019

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2019 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

Registration has now opened for the tenth annual Housing Technology conference and executive forum, taking place on Wednesday 6th and Thursday 7th March 2019 at the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry: more information at www.housing-technology.com/events/htc19.

Housing Technology 2019's core topics will be:

- **Back to basics – How should HAs be using their 'traditional' IT components (applications, infrastructure, etc) to ensure a solid foundation for future growth?**
- **Innovation & thought-leadership – How are HAs using IT in original, innovative and even counter-intuitive ways?**
- **Beyond housing – What IT/business applications & processes have HAs copied/used from beyond the social housing sector (i.e. retail, telecoms, banking, etc)?**
- **Connected tenants – What does 'digital inclusion 2.0' look like?**
- **Catalyst or enabler – Should IT drive HAs' business plans or vice versa?**
- **Future housing – What does the future state of HAs' IT estate look like?**

We have already booked many of the speakers, including senior IT and business executives from Accent Group, Adur & Worthing Councils, CHP, Coastal Housing, Coastline Housing, ForViva, HAC Housing, Housing & Care 21, Midland Heart, Natural History Museum (no, that's not a typo), Paradigm Housing, Pobl Group, RHP, Salix Homes, Solihull Community Housing, Torus and University of Exeter.

If you or your organisation has an innovative and/or interesting story to tell around any of the conference's main themes, please email **alastair@housing-technology.com** to discuss your possible presentation at the conference.

At the time of going to press, we have received early sponsorship and exhibitor bookings from many of the housing sector's key IT suppliers, including Aareon, Capita, Cloud Dialogs, DeltaScheme, Engage Property Technology, MIS-AMS, Mobysoft, Northgate Public Services, PowerObjects, Simpson Associates, Sovereign Business Integration and TSG, with many more to follow during the next few weeks.

If you're interested in sponsoring or exhibiting at Housing Technology 2019, please email george.grant@housing-technology.com.

Aareon
CAPITA
clouddialogs
deltascheme
ENGAGE
mis active
mobysoft
northgate
POWER OBJECTS
Simpson Associates
SOVEREIGN
TSG

GDPR IS HERE – WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Daniela Flores, In-house Counsel & GDPR Officer, Insite Energy

After over a year of build-up, GDPR has now been in force for over three months. But the real journey for the housing sector is only just beginning, as Daniela Flores, in-house counsel and GDPR officer at Insite Energy, explains.

The deadline of 25 May 2018 certainly created a sense of urgency, but the scope of GDPR extends far beyond this first milestone. Forward-thinking housing providers and local authorities are well aware of this and, rather than seeing it as an administrative nightmare or tick-box exercise, are focused on the bigger picture; where data protection flows through operations at every level and is a core part of corporate values. In this context, it is not just a legal necessity, but crucial to protecting and maintaining a business.

At Insite Energy, we manage metering, billing and payment services for heat networks, which involves processing a huge volume and detail of data on behalf of our clients. With over 180 communal heating schemes and 20,000 units, having an effective GDPR strategy has therefore been a priority. We believe that now is the ideal time to reflect on what has been achieved so far, identify where to make improvements and define the shape of things to come.

Rules of engagement

In the rush to take action, many organisations showed themselves to be confused about a number of different aspects of GDPR.

A basic principle of GDPR is consent. Judging by the volume of emails sent out the day before GDPR came into effect, I suspect many believed this to be the only legal basis for processing personal data. But this isn't the case.

For our clients in the housing sector, it's sufficient to provide tenants with an agreement with suitable data protection clauses, as well as a privacy notice explaining how data is used and the legal basis for processing it. As a contractual relationship, additional 'consent' is not needed.

What they need to be clear on, however, is that they are responsible for all of their contractors' compliance; everyone in the contractual chain must be compliant before any personal data is transferred to a third party.

The role of a data protection officer (DPO) also needs to be fully understood. Many organisations appointed one 'just in case', without knowing if they had a legal obligation to do so. While it may have seemed prudent to take such action, there is a lot more to it than simply giving someone a title.

The company must, for example, ensure that the DPO has expertise in data protection law and practices, as well as a complete understanding of the IT infrastructure and organisational structure. It can, in theory, appoint an existing employee, but only if their other responsibilities don't interfere with their ability to perform the role of DPO.

It's important to know that neither the controller nor processor can instruct the DPO on how to do their job; in fact, the role must report to the highest level of management. In addition, the DPO can't be dismissed or penalised for performing their duties. They must have adequate resources to carry out assigned tasks, and so the list goes on. Therefore, if a company is under no legal obligation to appoint a DPO, they should think very carefully before doing so.

Strategic approach

The fear of hefty fines from the Information Commissioner's Office for non-compliance was behind much of the reactive response to GDPR. Of course, this threat is still present, making it more important than ever that organisations adopt an effective long-term strategy. There are a number of steps to think about, such as:

- **Cyber security –** Ensure software is updated regularly to avoid weak spots. The 'Achieving Cyber Essentials' certification will also demonstrate IT security to government standards.
- **Risk assessments –** Carry out vulnerability reviews to address any changes or new threats to data protection. Consider all aspects such as data storage and remote access for employees. Personal data should at least be encrypted, including work laptops.
- **Staff training –** Enrol all staff on a GDPR course to ensure everyone is aware of key compliance obligations and handles data appropriately. Awareness of sensitive data and security should be part of your culture.
- **Breach detection, investigation and reporting procedures –** The ICO has useful guidelines on this, but we all have to realise that human error is always a risk.
- **Formal accreditation –** While there is as yet no certification specifically dedicated to GDPR, organisations looking for the next level of accreditation should consider ISO27001.

Clear vision

Clarifying these issues and instigating correct processes is only part of the GDPR story. It is now a real-time legal framework that will develop as new practices and technologies emerge. Organisations will need to constantly re-evaluate practices against these changing circumstances to ensure ongoing compliance.

The ones who will thrive in this new age of data protection are those who see it as an opportunity, rather than a constraint. We know that consumers are more inclined to share data with organisations they trust, and isn't transparency what GDPR is all about?

Daniela Flores is the in-house counsel and GDPR officer at Insite Energy.

CREATING A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC FUTURE

Leon Blakely, Senior Business Development Manager, Rackspace

In partnership with Housing Technology, Rackspace recently held a dinner for senior housing IT executives. During the evening, the conversations were centred around a wholesale move towards digital, for both tenants and housing providers. There's an understanding across the sector that organisations must engage with tenants in new and modern ways. This has led to housing providers rethinking their business strategies and embarking on ambitious journeys to enhance their service delivery methods.

Getting the right tools for your customers

This line of thinking dovetails with recent regulatory demands from the UK government. Such demands have enforced rent reductions and removed revenue streams. Again, digital transformation provides a solution; efficiency and engagement, respectively, reducing costs and catering for tenants who are increasingly digitally-aware.

Such digital transformation is a challenge. This is something that digital consultancy agency ORM (a Rackspace partner and co-presenter during the dinner) is helping housing providers with, so that they can become more efficient in delivering customer-centric experiences using the latest technologies. Managing partner and founder Peter Gough noted that in the past housing providers had technologies and systems working in silos, rather than together. They used technology as an approach in and of itself, rather than to understand their customers.

But as customers have become more digitally native, housing providers have increasingly wanted to meet that need. Gough said, "More than ever, housing providers must think differently and take a customer-centric approach with best-of-breed tools. Self-service and convenience must be at the front of everyone's minds."

Therefore, it's vital to pool the right technologies – build some, buy some – to create the best experience for customers, and solutions agile enough to deal with future industry changes.

Get the right support

During the evening, housing executives explained that they sometimes struggled to fulfil their ambitions. They spoke of a 'me too' approach to housing-sector 'tech stacks' and being frustrated with the traditional housing software providers that, although they have historically dominated the market, have been slow to introduce new collaborative technologies.

Such systems and providers can't support everything we've talked about. Yet, customers now expect to pay rent via mobile apps, book repairs online, and rely on everything from a housing provider to be a connected, user-friendly experience.

The guests also had concerns about in-house teams feeling under-equipped – sometimes lacking expertise, resources, tools and processes to start and maintain a transformation journey. A key aim should be to focus efforts on areas of differentiation rather than those that merely keep a business operational.

So, don't feel that you must be tied to the approaches of a key application provider. Go and build best-of-breed and take what you need to deliver the right solutions for your customers. But be mindful of when and where you need help and figure out the best delineation of responsibilities.

This might be in building and managing infrastructure or gaining insights on how to move from legacy systems while enhancing security provisions.

When it comes to support, upskilling and enhancing what you already have, a partner can augment your existing in-house expertise with external help and guidance. Such a partnership can save you time and money, making your organisation more flexible and agile, meaning you'll better adapt to whatever happens next.

'Landlord as a service'

During the Rackspace and Housing Technology dinner, such a sea change was suggested by a leading housing provider's CEO. He chatted about blockchain, predicting a future when distributed technology would enable someone to easily switch landlords. It was a 'cat amongst the pigeons' moment, an idea that challenged the core business model of housing providers and how customers are managed; such a change would represent massive industry disruption.

But when you look at the utilities market, you realise that people were until really quite recently stuck with a sole energy provider. Then things quickly changed and only organisations who'd adapted in time were able to immediately reap the rewards. Although it's easy to scoff at the notion of 'landlord as a service', it may well be the future.

Leon Blakely is a senior business development manager at Rackspace.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HOUSING

Gustavo Perez-Lopez, Head of AI, Geomant

Artificial intelligence (AI) powered solutions, in particular smart chat-bots, can help housing providers to transform themselves and meet the demands of the digital future.

The digital future of social housing

A recent survey by 3C Consultants suggested that by 2025 the typical housing provider will be fully digitised, offering 24/7, personalised services and having the majority of routine transactions carried out via smart, digital devices. The report also forecast that the housing environment will be very different and highly competitive by 2025, and "organisations will need to provide responsive services that customers want, while operating more efficiently".

With only a few years to fulfil 3C's 2025 digital prophecy, housing providers should be seriously looking at planning and executing their digital strategy. Technology is going to be at the forefront of this transformation that will require innovation, new thinking and new skills.

In their journey towards the fully-digitised future, housing organisations should stay smart and determine project priorities based on the best RoI. In this context, AI-powered intelligent chat-bots provide an incredibly cost-effective way of starting the digital journey. Let's see why and how.

The transformation drivers

Recent data about the status of digital transformation in the UK social housing sector are indicating that:

- The use of the internet is becoming more widespread among tenants, including elder generations;
- The use of smartphones and other mobile devices is rising, reaching 69 per cent digital penetration;
- Tenants are increasingly adopting online communication and self-service;
- More and more millennials are looking for affordable housing, with home ownership among young families having more than halved in some UK regions.

The stake for going digital is high for housing providers, not only as the new medium for customer engagement but also because of the inherent cost efficiencies, especially when comparing the average costs per transaction between online and traditional communication channels, as shown in the table on the nxt page.

Chat-bots as quick wins

A chat-bot is a service that can interact with customers via an online, text-based conversational interface. In addition:

- AI powered chat-bots can engage in human-like conversation, be trained to understand specific user intents and actions, initiate proactive notifications and execute transactions on their behalf, personalise the service, etc;
- They can be easily deployed onto multiple digital channels and messaging platforms available online and via mobile devices;
- Chat-bots are always-on and therefore can serve customers 24/7.

For example, one of the first housing chat-bots helped people who were evicted from their homes to draft an application letter for emergency housing from the local council by asking a few questions about their personal and legal circumstances.

Let's now review a few areas where chat-bots can bring immediate benefits for both housing providers and their tenants.

Automating FAQs from tenants and prospects

Implement an FAQ chat-bot that replies to typical questions 24/7. It can be easily fed and trained with existing FAQ lists, knowledge bases or simply using the transcripts of the most frequent conversation topics that you've had with your tenants over the years, e.g. how to apply for housing support, eligibility criteria, shared ownership options, etc. You could go even further and deploy an intelligent chat-bot that guides the customer through the entire housing application process online, all in a conversational, easy to follow question-and-answer style, with the convenience of just doing it via your smartphone.

Completing transactions via messaging apps

In a list of the most frequent tenants' requests provided to us by a housing provider, repair-related enquiries represented by far the highest percentage, followed by complaints about antisocial behaviour and enquiries about renting and swapping properties.

The solution? Implement a transactional chat-bot that can automate these requests and integrate with your back-office systems, and deploy it to the most popular messaging apps, such as Messenger, WhatsApp and Skype. For example:

- Request non-emergency repairs and book appointments;

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HOUSING

Continued from previous page

Channel	Face-to-face	Telephone	Post	IVR	Online
PWC report	£10.50	£3.40	£12.00	n/a	£0.1
SOCITM	£14.00	£5.00	n/a	£0.2	£0.2

- Report anti-social behaviour;
- Find a home: search for properties by simply typing your needs, e.g. "I am looking for a 3 bedroom house in Yorkshire for up to £100 a week";
- Manage my rent: request an account balance, set up payments and request a refund.

The human touch will remain important While a large percentage of enquiries and requests could be automated and taken online with the help of chat-bots and other AI tools, there will always be the need for personal contact.

For example, tenants falling behind with their rent would most likely want to speak to a person to discuss their situation, review options for repaying their debt or find an alternative financial solution. This highlights another benefit of using chat-bots; they free up a housing provider's staff to help tenants with the kind of problems that genuinely need the personal touch.

In our case, Geomant chat-bots are an integral part of the customer engagement journey and include the ability to escalate a bot conversation to a live agent, schedule a personal appointment or offer a call-back at a convenient time.

Get ahead of the game

We are proud to already have a few well-known housing providers as customers. They are using Geomant communication products and services to improve their processes and reach their organisational goals. And it's rewarding to see how these housing providers are taking technology really seriously to create competitive advantage and benefits, as evidenced by our customer Accent Housing who won the 'best use of technology' award at this year's Housing Association National Accountancy (HANA) awards.

Geomant AI-powered chat-bots are the logical next step for housing providers looking to be at the vanguard of customer service and transformation in the digital era. For customers already using our multimedia contact centre solutions, it couldn't be easier to add an intelligent chat-bot and instantly expand customer reach to messaging apps and mobile platforms.

Gustavo Perez-Lopez is the head of Geomant's AI practice.

CascadeHR at Melin Homes

In its move towards agile working, Melin Homes has implemented new HR software from CascadeHR.

Sharon Crockett, director of innovation and culture, Melin Homes, said, "As part of our push towards digital transformation, we realised that our staff needed to be able to work where, when and how they wanted."

However, it became clear that Melin's team couldn't become more flexible without a better HR system. Cascade HR was selected, and company-wide champions were appointed to encourage buy in. This helped the subsequent roll out, before other elements of the technology mix were also overhauled, including Melin's housing management system, server infrastructure and office telecoms.

Crockett said, "Before this project, 30 vans would line up outside our headquarters so that our direct workforce could collect their daily job sheets. Now real-time information is securely stored in the cloud, providing easy access via a mobile device, irrespective of location. This has reduced travel times by up to two hours per day, making our workforce more efficient and boosting their work-life balance.

"For agility to be genuinely embraced throughout the organisation, a sense of trust - certainly among our management team - was imperative. Prior to the CascadeHR implementation, our workforce had clock in/out fobs. However, knowing that these fobs signalled mistrust, Melin now allows them to input their own working times into CascadeHR. This admittedly brave move demonstrated our faith that people will work independently and transparently, which has energised colleagues who no longer feel 'watched'."

Bridging the gap between technology & business success

IT is at the heart of every business – equally, our clients are at the heart of our business. This is why our goal is to align technology with organisational strategy and objectives to ensure IT best supports you.

Consultancy | IT Services | Managed IT Services | Data Centre

Contact us on 020 8216 3333
or at housing@sovereign-plc.co.uk.
Alternatively, visit us at www.sovereign-plc.co.uk

SOVEREIGN
BUSINESS INTEGRATION GROUP