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Editor's Notes

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Now we are five

This issue marks the end of our fifth year of publishing Housing Technology. In that time, IT systems and services have really moved up the agenda for almost every housing provider and become a strategic item on most boardroom agendas. Over the same period, we have seen mobile working, virtualisation, GIS and mapping, telecare and multi-channel delivery, to name but a few, become mainstream areas.

At the same time, IT departments are under greater scrutiny to deliver (and prove that they deliver) value for money, with internal and cross-organisation benchmarking of IT services and costs becoming more common; we will be covering this in the next issue.

The next five years should be very exciting as many housing providers eclipse private-sector companies in their innovative use of IT. We also expect to see a period of IT consolidation, in part due to static or reduced budgets, as housing providers seek to cut out duplication of information between systems and consolidate some of their 'islands of information' resulting from ad-hoc standalone solutions. The end goal should be the coveted 'single version of the truth', first-time fix for tenant enquiries and seamless straight-through processing from front- to back-office.

IT supplier review

Readers with good memories will perhaps recall that we announced our intention to research and publish our 'Review of Technology Suppliers and Systems' report back in the March 2012 issue of Housing Technology. More than a few months later, we are pleased to finally announce that the online survey will be live by the time you read this (in its printed format).

As we mentioned originally, unlike our previous three reports which looked at trends in IT usage, this new report will provide a fascinating insight into the quality of IT suppliers and their systems across important areas such as functionality, value for money, implementation, ease of integration and technical/customer support, as rated by senior IT staff within housing providers. More information will follow by email shortly – everyone completing the survey will receive a free copy of the final report.

Bulging sacks

As you will see on page 35, we've had quite a postbag for this issue's readers' letters. Indeed, we didn't have room to publish them all so the remainder will appear in the January 2013 issue. We would encourage all readers to engage with and respond to this issue's letters – they cover an excellent range of topics, from cloud computing and IT supplier jargon, through cloud computing and mobile working, to the headaches of universal credit, benchmarking and delivering value for money. Join the debate and email your letters for publication to **news@housing-technology.com.**

FUTURE EVENTS

Housing Technology 'Beer & Pizza' evening
20 November 2012, London
events@housing-technology.com

MOBex and HITex
Various dates and locations in 2012
lynda.redshaw@northern-consortium.org.uk

National Housing Federation – IT in Housing Conference
20-21 November 2012, London
www.housing.org.uk

Visualmetrics – Performant Public Services
Various dates and locations in 2012
www.visualmetrics.co.uk

Housing Technology 2013 conference & executive forum
20 & 21 February 2013, Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry
www.housing-technology.com/conference

Suffolk Housing's new Aareon HMS with Keylogic

Suffolk Housing is in the middle of implementing a new housing and financial management system from Aareon, with the entire infrastructure hosted by Keylogic. The project began in July 2012 and is expected to be live in spring 2013.

The project follows a review in 2011 of Suffolk Housing's existing systems after which the housing provider realised that a new system was needed, including support for workflow to automate and streamline processes and provide a more integrated view of its housing and financial data. Repairs invoicing was also cited as an area for improvement.

Suffolk Housing also wanted a managed service from a single supplier so that it could focus solely on its housing and tenant operations, with a hosted service for all of its current applications. After an OJEU-based tender process, it chose QL Housing and QL Financials from Aareon, with hosting provided by Keylogic at its datacentre in Gosport.

Karen Moore, corporate services manager, Suffolk Housing, said, "After a detailed evaluation of a number of systems, our project team was unanimous in deciding that QL Housing and QL Financials was the best solution. We felt that Aareon and Keylogic were able to demonstrate a customer service ethos that mirrored our own and we look forward to transforming the way our business works for the benefit of our residents."

The project began in July 2012 with the core housing and financial modules as well as QL CRM, Core Workflows and Management Reporting alongside the transfer of Suffolk Housing's current applications to the hosted environment. A second phase of the project will cover the implementation of QL Asset Management as well as applications for mobile working from 1st Touch and electronic document management from Documotive.

OmniLedger wins three Pyramid customers

Care Housing Association, Lench's Trust and Yardley Great Trust are set to implement Omniledger's Pyramid system.

Care Housing has ordered the complete Pyramid housing management system to cover all of its operations, from rent collection to property management, and Lench's Trust has ordered the Pyramid Rent Accounting and Property Management modules.

Jean-Luc Priez, chief executive, Lench's Trust, said, "Our initial review of the modules and their use by staff have been encouraging – we will be able to respond more efficiently to our residents' requests for information and meet key national standards."

Yardley Great Trust has also ordered the rent accounting and property management modules to manage its sheltered accommodation, a care home and a nursing home.

Alan Martin, chief executive, Yardley Great Trust, said, "We needed an integrated system within which we could include our care and nursing homes, which can often cause problems for other housing management systems."

BluTek supports Greensquare's development

GreenSquare Group is using a suite of workflow tools from BluTek as part of a redesign of its core property development systems. Delivered on a software-as-a-service basis, BluTek's WorkFlow engine covers initial feasibility assessment, development and planning, project management, sales and marketing, and defects management.

Richard Reynolds, financial planning and analysis manager, GreenSquare Group, said, "We believe that the built-in workflow engine that the systems use will help us to improve our business processes in an increasingly-complex development programme and deliver the efficiency gains that most systems only promise."

Companies in this issue

SDS links with Savills for appraisals & valuations

Software developer SDS and Savills have agreed to link the Savills Automated Valuation Model (AVM) with the SDS ProVal viability appraisal application.

Savills entered into a partnership last year with Rightmove to make their desktop tool for referencing rents and capital values available to the affordable housing sector.

This latest agreement with SDS will give users of ProVal LS direct access to AVM and hold the data within an appraisal. This data is a critical input for establishing the viability of new developments and/or assessing stock options, and holding the data with the appraisal will make it easier to review and audit these inputs.

Work on the link between AVM and ProVal is due to start this month and is expected to be completed by the end of 2012.

South Norfolk upgrades Abritas CBL software

Following a review by KPMG of South Norfolk Council's housing allocation policies and processes, the council has chosen Abritas's integrated web-based housing needs software.

Before the review, the council was using Abritas's CBL software in conjunction with a Capita housing management system, alongside numerous other spreadsheets to manage temporary accommodation. The review suggested that a single system would improve internal efficiency and reduce costs as well as make the housing process easier for prospective tenants.

The council has now upgraded its original Abritas CBL system and added additional Abritas modules covering the housing register, housing advice and homelessness, and tenancies and rents.

Gill Duffy, housing and advice services manager, South Norfolk Council, said, "We have been able to reduce and eliminate a number of manual processes, double entry and workarounds as the system holds household details at its core. It also enables good interaction with tenants electronically, reducing the costs of printing and postage."

FINANCE & ASSET MANAGEMENT
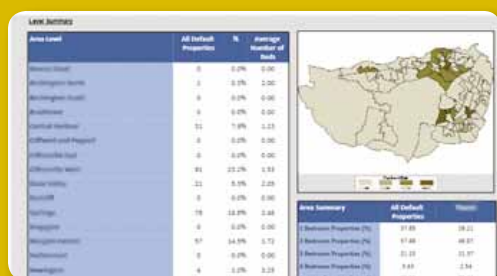
Coactiva prepares Southern Housing for universal credit

Southern Housing Group is using Coactiva's data collection and analysis services to identify which households in its 25,000 properties are most at risk from next year's planned introduction of universal credit.

Before Coactiva's involvement, SHG had already sent its information relating to 'number of bedrooms' to each local authority within its stock areas, but SHG then had difficulty collecting the required housing benefit information from the respective local authorities. Even when housing benefit data had been returned, it was inconsistently formatted and didn't include enough information to calculate household under-occupancy.

As Coactiva was already receiving 100 Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) files from local authorities throughout the UK, SHG chose the company to smooth the data collection and analysis process. Coactiva's data bureau and reporting service collects, matches and hosts the tenant and benefit data, with SHG given access to Coactiva's online analytical reporting and mapping tool to enable the housing provider to identify and support the tenants most likely to be affected by the welfare reforms.

Judy McGough from Southern Housing Group said, "With the challenges imposed by the pending introduction of universal credit, it is essential for us to easily identify our affected tenants and assess where to target resources most effectively. Coactiva's analytics enable that critical measurement and understanding of the operational and cost implications."

Family Mosaic improves service charging with BlueBox

Graham Davies from Trace Solutions with Pam Moran and Saul Stevens from Family Mosaic

Family Mosaic is tackling the complex area of accurately allocating service charges using Bluebox property management software from Trace Solutions. Bluebox will automate the majority of the service charge processes, replacing the hundreds of individual spreadsheets that Family Mosaic was using before.

Pam Moran, head of customer accounts, Family Mosaic, said, "Our systems were originally designed to accommodate a reasonably straightforward rent management process. Our business model has changed and we are now managing a complex mixture of rented and owned, or part owned, accommodation, sometimes all within the same property. The need to allocate and charge costs on an individual basis makes the process much more difficult, yet still commonplace.

"The only way we could get anywhere near a suitable solution was to prepare Excel spreadsheets for each property but this becomes a recipe for disaster in instances where you have 100 tenants in a building!

It's labour intensive, time consuming and inefficient, and can't be audited easily."

The Bluebox system is now installed, with Trace Solutions in the process of importing the data and setting up the accounting parameters, charts of accounts and other user-definable coding structures. The system is scheduled to be fully operational by April 2013 so that Family Mosaic can produce next year's budgets and the associated reports for its residents.

Saul Stevens, IT director, Family Mosaic, said, "Rent and service charge management is a complicated and important part of our business. We reviewed our systems and realised that the lack of automation in the management of service charges was not only leading to inaccuracies but fundamentally preventing us from growing."

Graham Davies, business development director, Trace Solutions, said, "BlueBox is based on management by exception (MBE), an approach that is relatively new

to the property sector. MBE focuses on automation. Quite simply, the system deals with routine items automatically and identifies the exceptions that need attention and presents this information to the user.

"This allows the user to automate a huge proportion of the detailed running of a property business. It also helps identify the problem debtors who cause nearly all the trouble."

Moran said, "By improving our service to leaseholders we also reduce the grounds on which they may decide not to pay. Automation takes the day-to-day problems out of our hands and lets the system run itself. We can then focus on just the problem areas that need specific attention."

Housing statement outsourcing from Tall Group

The Tall Group has launched a secure statement printing solution for housing providers as part of its business process outsourcing services. The company has spent more than £50,000 on laser printing technology and intelligent mailing equipment to support the service and ensure high levels of security, accuracy and efficiency.

A newly-created digital print and mailing room will house the operation at the production facility of Checkprint, part of the Tall Group, in Leicestershire. All documents are securely printed with a barcode that matches items to envelopes, while multi-page statements are automatically inserted into larger or multiple envelopes as needed.

Martin Ruda, managing director, The Tall Group, said, "We have found that many housing providers are still printing and mailing their statements in-house, creating a drain on internal resources and missing out on an opportunity to reduce risk and operational overheads.

"With the planned introduction of Universal Credit, housing providers will face added payment challenges in the future, so our solutions are designed to help better manage these processes."

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Cassiltoun Housing SORP-compliant with RAM

Glasgow's oldest housing co-operative has signed up to use the latest specialist component accounting software from Real Asset Management to ensure long-term SORP compliance.

Cassiltoun will use RAM's Asset4000 software to streamline the management of its £42 million asset register comprising nearly 8,000 assets including houses, offices, a children's nursery and training rooms. The software is being implemented at the moment and is expected to be live by the end of November 2012.

Cassiltoun's finance department originally used a spreadsheet-based tool in order to meet the April 2012 deadline for SORP compliance but as many other housing providers have found to their cost,

spreadsheets were only suitable as a short-term fix.

Gamal Haddou, finance director, Cassiltoun Housing Association, said, "After working closely with our external auditors to develop a detailed, spreadsheet-based asset management model, it became apparent that minor errors were creeping into the data and it was increasingly difficult to maintain a multitude of different worksheets. It was also very time consuming to extract information and difficult to get an overview of the components included.

"Efficient and accurate component accounting requires a level of detail that is beyond the capabilities of both traditional finance solutions and housing asset

management systems. Asset4000 allows us to control, track and accurately record changes that occur within the lifetime of each individual asset. Not only does this ensure SORP compliance at all times, but it also gives us much better management information and streamlines administrative processes within the finance department."

One of the limitations of Cassiltoun's original spreadsheet-based tool was that access was limited to one person at a time. Asset4000 allows multiple users within the finance team to access it simultaneously making it easier and faster for them to produce the various monthly management reports.

Rooftop and Festival perform with Clearview

Ian Hughes, Chief Executive, Rooftop Housing Group

Two Clearview customers, Rooftop Housing Group and Festival Housing, have reported on the long-term results of using the company's performance management software.

Rooftop has been using the Clearview software since 2007 and since then it has achieved both a three-star and excellent rating from the Audit Commission and a gold accreditation from Investors in People. In both instance the assessors commented on how effectively the Clearview systems were used by Rooftop.

Sheila Morris, human resources director, Rooftop Housing Group, said, "Our previous planning process was essentially paper-based requiring considerable effort to keep live and up-to-date. Now that the plans are living documents and the process continuous, we have a more accurate understanding of strategic progress, we monitor more frequently and we don't reinvent the wheel whenever we revisit our business plan."

Rooftop reported that its savings comprised around £52,000 from improved productivity

and resource utilisation and just over £12,000 of direct 'cashable' savings.

Ian Hughes, chief executive, Rooftop Housing Group, said, "The original business case for the Clearview implementation was based on reaching a five per cent efficiency gain. From the second year, it was evident that Clearview was delivering value for money amounting to productivity gains of around £65,000 per year, equivalent to five per cent of our management costs, allowing us to re-allocate staffing resources that were previously used to prepare the performance data."

Festival saves £170,000 with Clearview

Festival Housing began using Clearview in 2005, upgrading to a later version in 2009 and more recently completed a project to

automate the majority of the KPIs in the Clearview performance scorecard module by populating them direct from the source systems.

Lee Parkes, performance manager, Festival Housing, said, "To meet our performance needs, we need to enter 10,000 lines of information into the scorecard each month. Automation of this process has resulted in a saving of over 10 days each month and now takes just over six minutes to load."

Festival said that it was saving more than £170,000 per year, with productivity improvements worth almost £160,000 and 'cashable' savings of around £12,000.

Neil Bullock, IT and risk manager, Festival Housing, said, "We know we have one place to look for the 'single version of the truth'. The time savings throughout the organisation are immeasurable, and having risks cascaded down such that controls and actions are dealt with where they need to be has greatly improved our risk exposure and residual risk view."

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Competitive dialogue – Part two

John Paul, Project Consultant, Viridian Housing

This is the second in a series of articles from Viridian's project consultant, John Paul, covering the various stages of a live Competitive Dialogue procurement process. Subsequent articles will track the progress of the project, from its inception through to, we hope, contract signatures. The first article was published in the September 2012 issue of Housing Technology.

In the last edition I described why I think the OJEU Competitive Dialogue (CD) process is suited to IT application procurements and this month I will be updating you on how a real life one is progressing.

Using a structured scoring system, we selected the top six Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) submissions for the next CD stage, Invitation to Submit Outline Proposal (ISOP). This stage is quite like the Request for Proposal (RFP) approach but of course being a public procurement, we have to take great care to provide a fair and transparent assessment process. The practical outcome of this is an ISOP document that runs to over 40 pages – deep joy for all.

Get the general idea first

However, is a discipline that makes you set out the selection criteria and scoring system early in the process really a bad thing? In order to be able to produce the ISOP document, you have to be able to write down the selection process, knowing also that you will have to stick to it. It still surprises me just how effective producing written statements is in winkling out areas of disagreement or lacking in clarity. When drafting these documents we are obliged to resolve disagreements or set them out as alternative options. My experience so far is that the discussion needed to get to written statements is a good way to get engagement and the procurement timetable sets out deadlines for this to happen. A key benefit of this approach is that it defines a timeline where we start from a general idea of what is required and then move through stages of adding detail before ending with a contract. I like the staged approach because it allows time for people's ideas to crystallise and time to expose and resolve areas of difference.

So far, so long winded, but recent news has produced a couple of worrying developments on public procurement. Of course, the big one is the West Coast rail franchise and closer to home, Circle's maintenance contracts. There are couple of useful lessons here. The first is that very complicated scoring and ranking systems are a potential minefield. They need to be checked and checked again to ensure they really provide a fair assessment which means that the assumptions need to be very clear. Usually the assumptions would be set out by the procurer but it is reasonable to allow suppliers some leeway here. For example, if a supplier believes its software can be operated by fewer people, it might be reasonable for them to include fewer licences, but how could you verify this? In most software procurements it is probably best to stick to fixed assumptions that are set out in the document and used in all submissions.

Risk of legal challenge

The Circle procurement illustrates the reality that the risk of legal challenge is high when high value contracts are involved. The standard defence is to run a fair process, sticking to the rules and document everything. Our legal friends can help, particularly in making sure documentation is well drafted, but I think there is another, less tangible but important factor to address. It is really important that suppliers feel they have been dealt with fairly and reasonably. If there are perceptions of unfairness then they can be a key factor in the decision to launch a legal challenge. Anyone who saw Richard Branson after Virgin lost the West Coast franchise could see that he felt very strongly that they had been unfairly treated. Of course, all the legal work needed to ensure that the process not only is fair but also feels fair to everyone takes time and money but consider the alternative; the government (a.k.a. us taxpayers) is having to dish out for all the abortive costs on the West Coast deal and run the whole thing again.

Enough doom and gloom, so how is my current project going? The ISOP stage is almost complete and has gone well. The dialogue with each supplier was focused around demonstrations of their products and produced interesting results. One supplier produced an unexpected option to reduce the complexity of the final solution which could add a lot of value. Another realised that their proposal did not fully align with our most important success factors and decided to withdraw from the process. The others all submitted excellent proposals which are now being reviewed and assessed to identify two or three to go forward to the next stage, Invitation to Submit Detailed Solution (ISDS).

Shifting emphasis

This is where our focus shifts from the emphasis being on the paper submissions to more verification of capabilities through reference site visits. It would be great to do site visits at the ISOP stage but the time and resources to do this thoroughly for the larger number had to be taken into account. The other thing that is happening is that thinking around the wider IT application strategy is starting to focus on the options that are now on the table as part of the procurement. There are three strategic choices (which I can't describe here) but the ISOP has brought them forward as real possibilities and 'fit with strategy' is built in to the assessment scoring.

The whole OJEU process takes time and resources but often you need time to get clarity of purpose from a wide group of people and to build the engagement needed for successful outcomes. It is a myth in most cases to think that you can get the best, clearest and most detailed statement of requirements set out at the start of a procurement project. Things change and if the requirements are set in stone they can be very out of date by the time of the contract is signed, let alone implementation.

The important thing is to achieve that elusive clarity and detail at the key critical points when decisions are made and resources committed. I see all procurements as learning journeys where we discover the unique situational knowledge needed for a successful outcome in each case. It's unique because while there are plenty of common factors in every procurement, some key factors such as the people, organisations and operating environments are never exactly the same. And as ever, it's the people and processes that are the keys to success, not just the technology.

John Paul is a project consultant at Viridian Housing.

New models for asset finance and procurement

*From L to R: Mark Kelly, Relationship Director, Lombard Technology Services
Tony Beddows, Commercial Director, ConvergeOne*

When it comes to benefiting from efficiencies gained from developments in technology, housing providers are no strangers to the concept of investing in new equipment to deliver cost savings. Many organisations in this sector have already recognised the need to optimise investment in IT, and this goes hand-in-hand with a growing awareness that the method of procurement is fundamental to this process.

In a market that is seeing increasing consolidation, procurement of services such as technology is firmly in the spotlight. One solution is asset finance which, for those that have not previously considered this form of funding, offers significant operational, strategic and financial benefits.

Asset finance enables companies to lease IT equipment purely for the duration of its useful life rather than to purchase it at full cost, with the future resale value reflected in lower rentals and supporting regular upgrade cycles which in turn can reduce maintenance costs, and includes compliant disposal by the lessor.

Benefits of asset finance

The benefits of using this form of technology funding include:

- **Flexibility:** equipment can be leased for a specific period of time that suits your business;
- **Frees up capital:** cash can be used elsewhere in the business, or to align with the company's financial strategy;
- **Budgeting:** costs are known at the start of the agreement and fixed for the contract term so that income streams are clearer and allowing the business to plan better;
- **Cost savings:** the future resale value can be reflected in reduced rentals;
- **Lower cost of ownership:** leasing encourages an optimum replacement cycle and therefore avoids the rise in maintenance, support and software expenditure;
- **Disposal:** the lessor is responsible for disposing of the equipment in accordance with the Waste Electrical & Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive.

Funding is only one aspect of the wider packages available from providers of technology asset management services. The broader range of services available on the market enables businesses to manage their IT systems more efficiently and cost effectively, and are evolving to play a more significant role in today's business environment.

Within the technology asset management market we have noted that there has been a shift in focus to more inclusive funding packages that address software costs and also finance for installation in order to provide greater flexibility for businesses that want a more integrated approach to the funding and management of their IT estates. Funders have extended this to recapitalisation of customer-developed software.

Housing-specific funding

For example, we have sought to identify sector-specific IT funding requirements for housing providers and have developed end-user covenants that provide tailor-made funding for managed service companies so that they can provide their customers with a total business solution.

In addition, ConvergeOne offers lease finance through Lombard Technology Solutions, aligning technical and finance support. Alliances like these enable both parties to widen the range of services to customers in this sector and provide a more structured approach to business needs.

As IT asset management services expand, it is important that housing providers are aware of what suppliers can provide.

Where multiple locations are involved, managing technology assets becomes fundamental. Asset management systems, such as our own online system, enable tighter budget management, advanced end-of-lease management and extensive support capacity so that a customer understands where each asset is located and is able to integrate it into the broader IT estate.

Invoice management

Another service that is particularly relevant to the social housing sector is an invoice management facility which means that organisations link IT investment to work cycles through a pre-lease facility. This is agreed for a specific period of time, for example three months, and acts as an overdraft, with suppliers invoicing the asset management provider directly. At the end of each period, the amount invoiced is rolled into the lease.

Finally, at the end of the IT asset's life, disposal is a specialised process that not only has considerations for individual environment policies and responsibilities, but which also needs to be managed to meet the WEEE Directive. This was introduced to the UK in 2007 to promote the recycling of materials used in technology production and to minimise landfill and its harmful effects. It is the responsibility of the business to ensure that their equipment is disposed of correctly.

Safe disposal of IT assets

More and more businesses are starting to realise the high costs of 'safe disposal' and are turning to a technology rental or lease agreement where disposal is included as part of the service. At the same time, it is important that housing providers can continue with their day-to-day business and remain confident that they have complied with legislation through their finance partnership.

Using a specialist asset management provider therefore not only improves cash flow but provides a plethora of functions and benefits for housing providers operating in today's economy. By exploring what can be provided, your organisation will have more time to focus on core business functions and not only optimise IT efficiency but also deliver a higher quality service to your tenants.

Mark Kelly is the relationship director at Lombard Technology Services and Tony Beddows is the commercial director at ConvergeOne.

Telecare and assisted living in housing

Dr Richard Curry, e-health development director, South East Health Technologies Alliance

We're all familiar with the idea of the smart house of the future fitted with labour-saving gadgets and providing services to its occupants at the touch of a button. Some of the ideas are a bit fanciful, even James Bond-like, but developments in technology are taking us in that direction and none more so than in healthcare.

Because of improvements in medicine, people are living longer and as a result there is a growing need for appropriate social housing. At the same time, individuals are increasingly suffering with chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and hypertension. Rather than keeping people in hospital or care homes, there is a growing realisation that it is better for individuals to remain in their own homes.

Research has shown that it is more cost-effective and desirable to treat people of all ages in their homes rather than them constantly traipsing to a hospital, unnecessarily using their time and that of medics. For example, diabetics can take their blood-sugar levels at home and have them checked remotely by a nurse. Heart disease patients can take their blood pressure and have their pulse-rate checked without leaving their home. These, among many other examples, are known as 'assisted living'.

Remote care and support

Assisted living is the use of sensors and information and communications technologies to facilitate the remote delivery of care and support to people to allow them to live as independently as possible in the lowest intensity care setting consistent with their needs and wishes.

Technology does not operate in isolation, but in conjunction with an integrated and flexible care management service, delivered by care providers who can act on information provided and also provide proactive support. Such technology works remotely, allowing the individual and the care provider to be separated in distance or time (or both) but still able to communicate. This all means that individuals living in social care should be able to enjoy unrestricted choice over their care setting.

Remote technology offers a multitude of applications and purposes to housing providers and their tenants. For example, the provision of telephone-based care management can provide proactive support such as the use of video-conferencing to deliver personalised rehabilitation programmes, an alarm to a carer in the next room which alerts them to make an intervention (for instance, to prevent accidents due to night wandering), and the transmission of physiological data by a patient to a monitoring centre for weekly reporting to another care professional.

Fewer admissions

Such monitoring services have been shown to lower anxiety in patients and their carers, reduce unnecessary admissions to hospitals and allow doctors to discharge patients earlier because they know the patient has good access to follow-up care services should they be needed.

Assisted living technology can be assigned to one household or two or three, but ideally a housing provider should be aware of the collective needs of its residents so that a larger and more detailed strategy is in place to support them with an appropriate communications infrastructure.

It is important to note that assisted living is not only for the elderly. Other groups living in social housing, such as the disabled, younger people with long-term conditions, and those recovering at home from a period in hospital can also benefit.

Maintaining health

It's also possible to imagine that such services to the home would be useful to those people simply wishing to maintain their health. Making such services readily available is half the battle; if people were more aware of their health and were able to proactively do something about it, for example by becoming 'self-carers', in the longer term this would reduce demands on statutory services. Beyond an individual level, there is the possibility of creating communities and cities whose residents are maintaining their health and routinely reporting their wellbeing, creating a massive public health database and early warning system.

Houses of the future will have a network of sensors that provide residents with the services they require. In other words, assisted living is integral to smart homes and part of the fabric of life.

Smart metering

An emerging area of assisted living is through the smart metering programme. The smart meter is a hub that collects information on utility usage, displaying it locally and transmitting the data to utility companies. It has already been shown that this hub can collect data and transmit messages from others such as the health services. An important feature of the smart metering programme is that it deals with existing housing stock, not just new builds. Nevertheless there are technological and organisational issues yet to be overcome.

The major technological issue is ensuring that the network both inside the home and outside is robust. Devices connected to the network must be interoperable so that the network can be expanded as needed. The organisational issues are around the complexity of the supply chain for assisted living, especially where it involves the statutory sector supplying a service. This will involve a public/private sector partnership but such things have been done before with, for instance, community alarm services. Assisted living must be easy to buy and install, along the lines of DIY. If it required an installation engineer, people would be put off and add an extra cost.

There is sufficient technology available to do this now; what is needed is a way of linking it all together.

Dr Richard Curry is the e-health development director for the South East Health Technologies Alliance (SEHTA) and an independent consultant in telemedicine and assisted living.

Identicom protects One Housing workers

One Housing Group is using Connexion2 devices from Identicom to protect its lone workers.

One Housing staff entering a new or possibly dangerous situation can activate an 'amber alert' to leave a brief voice message detailing where they are, whom they are seeing and the possible risks. This message is accessed by an alarm receiving centre (ARC) if a 'red alert' is subsequently triggered from the device. ARC staff can then discreetly listen to what is happening and assess the level of support required. All audio captured through the device is recorded for future use as court evidence if required.

Sue Needham, head of regional housing operations, One Housing Group, said, "Previously if a staff member hadn't phoned in to say they were safe, I had to call them to check on their whereabouts. Now I know that wherever they are, there is always someone monitoring their welfare."

One Housing Group is using the devices as part of Identicom's SoloProtect package which is a fully-managed solution with inclusive billing incorporating Connexion2 devices, 24/7 manned monitoring, SIM cards and mobile network usage, device training and monthly reporting. Connexion2 devices are ACPO 'secured by design' accredited.

Telecetera signs 5-year deal with Cheltenham Borough Homes

Cheltenham Borough Homes has introduced mobile working after entering into a five-year contract with Telecetera for its Connect mobile workforce system.

Connect includes an appointment and scheduling module and integrates with multiple back-office systems so that CBH can roll out the mobile system to all of its field-based workers including its maintenance and repairs staff.

Emma Wall, building services manager, Cheltenham Borough Homes, said, "The most exciting prospect is that the software can be changed to suit us specifically and so the software will develop with us as we continue provide excellent service as a 'three-star' organisation."

Swindon Commercial Services reports on Consilium project

Having used Consilium's TotalMobile application for the last six years, Swindon Commercial Services has reported savings of over £50,000 per year alongside considerable productivity improvements.

Neil Saunders, renewable energy projects manager, Swindon Commercial Services, said, "TotalMobile has revolutionised our housing repairs, maintenance and servicing business, with engineers working more efficiently without the constant relay back and forth to the depot. As each engineer completes a job, the system automatically allocates the next most relevant task.

"One of the most valuable features is that it still works even when offline so that when in areas where there is no signal, workers can continue their tasks as normal. When signal is restored, the system automatically updates the back-office with any information gathered."

SCS reported that by using the Consilium software, productivity has increased by 35 per cent and back-office efficiency raised by 10 per cent, resulting in overall efficiency savings of £50,000 per year and 'cashable' savings of £30,000 per year from reduced print and paper usage.

Arena adds mobile & tenant profiling to Tracker Suite

Arena Partnership has added new modules to its Tracker Suite to improve the tracking and analysis of all tenant interactions.

The iTracker module enables tenant details and profiles to be accessed on an iPad and data entry tasks completed while in the field, with the information then synchronised with the main Tracker Suite application in the office.

The Household Tracker module allows housing providers to develop a precise profile of each property and individuals living in it. This is displayed on a single screen with detailed profiling and contact data as well as additional information such as household incomes and benefits, the number of rooms in the property and which utilities are accessible.

Alan Marshall, managing director, Arena Partnership, said, "Housing providers increasingly want to improve how they interact with an often diverse cross-section of tenants and users. It's also about matching tenant preferences to the different communications processes available."

Link's lone workers safe with Guardian24

Following a tendering process earlier this year, Scotland's Link Group has extended its use of a lone-worker protection system from Guardian24.

Link Group reported that despite initial resistance, staff using the Guardian24 mobile phone-based system on a regular basis find it quick and easy to use, with the number of escalations reducing as it is used routinely for logging activities.

Brain Gippert, health and safety officer, Link Group, said, "The system lets us log activities and use mobiles covertly to summon help if needed. Our lone workers see the use of the Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) as the first point of contact for Guardian24 as a positive step forward in improving communication.

"The use of individual protocols for ARC allows a more flexible approach to

contacting staff on activity over-runs or failure to end activities on time, usually ending any possible escalations quickly.

The provision of incident reports and the ability to provide management with an overview of use allows issues to be identified and action taken to correct them.

Accent's iPads for board meetings

Gordon Perry, Chief Executive, Accent Group

Accent Group's board members have just completed a trial of using iPads running GoodReader for their board meetings as a possible replacement for printed materials and as an alternative to a more expensive dedicated 'board papers' system.

Stuart Duthie, head of ICT, Accent Group, said, "Using one of the dedicated systems for board papers would have cost us around £10,000 per year, so we decided to trial GoodReader, an app which costs just £2.99.

"It offers much of the functionality as the dedicated systems, including integration with our SharePoint-based intranet, and has a range of tools to allow board members to make notes and mark-up papers. Sensible bookmarking of the original PDF files lets board members quickly navigate the board papers through a simplified agenda."

Gwyneth Sakar, chair of Accent Group, said, "Using the iPad for reading and marking the reports was easy, and managing the information at the same time as chairing meetings was simpler than I expected."

Accent also reported that the tablet-based system would result in considerable cost savings through reduced paper, copying and postage, and time spent compiling and distributing the board packs to members.

Leicester council grasps Wheatley mobile working

Leicester City Council has completed the implementation of a new mobile working system from Wheatley Associates. The council manages 22,000 properties and employs over 450 trade operatives.

Wheatley Associates' browser-based GRASP software, covering appointment booking, work scheduling, tracking and mobile communications, has been integrated with LCC's existing Capita housing management system for

complete synchronisation of the mobile workforce's work details, including jobs booked, amended or cancelled through the customer call centre and visits made, work carried out and appointments booked in the field. GRASP also links to LCC's Agresso stores and materials management system to make remote store requests, orders, bookings and usage reports easier to handle.

Ian Craig, head of direct services, Leicester City Council, said, "Achieving the

right balance of efficiency and customer satisfaction is a difficult and complex problem which is magnified by the size of our workforce. GRASP is enabling us to drive out inefficiency, improve productivity, scale to our workforce and concentrate on enhancing the experience of our tenants."

Amrik Singh, planning and major works manager, Leicester City Council, "Planning daily work schedules for such a large

mobile workforce and ensuring that the right people with the right skills are on site at the right time isn't easy. GRASP not only provides us with the basis for planning our work schedules but also enables us to respond dynamically to the changes happening in the field for all our operatives."

LCC plans to extend the use of mobile software to more than 1,000 mobile workers covering other council departments such as social services and the clerk of works.

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Google or Bing? Tape or Disk? Recover your organisation with or without Data? That last question rests entirely on the management of the backup process you have in place to restore your organisations' Data when the unexpected happens. In the housing sector, every IT Manager knows that when Data goes missing, their day is going to be a tough one unless a resilient solution is in place to ensure all Data is retrievable in a minimum timeframe. In fact, the magazine *Law Practice Today* states, 'Loss of client files and years of accumulated resources can certainly mean the death of any business.' They say, 'From 73% to 90% of all small businesses who experience a crash or loss of critical information are put out of business within one year.' ADAM Continuity has been working alongside their Clients in the housing sector for some time, ensuring they have a resilient, end-to-end backup solution in place, tailored to their IT infrastructure's every need. ADAM helped Simon Kane, IT Manager at Framework Housing Association, and his team, to ditch tape and take to the Cloud.

They have been backing up their Data offsite to an ADAM-owned vault, based in the UK since 2010. Simon comments, "Working with ADAM Continuity has given me peace of mind knowing that when I need to access backed up Data, the Data will be available and more importantly, usable."

Time is the big issue

Prior to signing a contract with ADAM, Framework found that backing up with tape everyday was causing their IT team a great deal of hassle. This was primarily due to the risk carried with backing up onsite and the possibility of errors due to tape degradation and software error. Simon notes, "Our previous solution would take days, if not weeks to restore all of our Data from tape onto replacement gear so it was at a useable state; there was always a possibility of errors." With ADAM Continuity's Cloud Connected Backup solution, powered by EVault software, Simon is able to restore all of his Data to replacement kit (supplied by ADAM) and have it ready to use again in a matter of hours. Craig Williams (also an ADAM Client) from United Welsh Housing Association said, "The speed of backup is impressive and we can safely backup 20 servers in only a few hours."

If anything does fail, we are notified immediately."

Attend an ADAM Forum

After first signing a Ship-to-Site Disaster Recovery contract with ADAM, Framework Housing attended one of ADAM Continuity's Forums on Cloud Connected Backup. Here, they were offered a pilot of the solution and decided to take the opportunity. Following the success of the pilot, which covered a number of their servers, they concluded that investing in further hardware and software wasn't financially viable. They decided to protect their whole server environment with ADAM's Cloud Connected Backup solution. Simon comments, "We've tested it, it works and I was pretty blown away."

ADAM Continuity, established in 1994, is a leading provider of Disaster Recovery and Backup solutions in the Business Continuity sector. "When you backup your data, you backup because you may have to restore. That's why ADAM Continuity's main ethos rests on Backup solutions where 'Back to Work is Key.'" Philip Caulfield is the Managing Director of ADAM (below).

If you are interested in attending one of ADAM's forums, get in touch by using the contact box below.

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Philip Caulfield, Managing Director of ADAM   **WEB:** www.adam.co.uk **EMAIL:** advice@adam.co.uk **TWITTER:** twitter.com/adamcontinuity

Integrated Services launches customer portal

Integrated Services, a specialist division of Wolseley UK, has developed a free online portal tailored for each customer, allowing them to access their own data and product information.

The interactive dashboard includes key management information and performance measures such as spend trackers, stock availability and credit note analysis. Bespoke PDF reports can be created and information can be displayed in interactive tables and graphs.

Grant Richardson, trading director for Integrated Services, Wolseley UK, said, "The portal has been developed over the last year as a response to customer feedback that identified a need for a more efficient and coherent reporting system.

"It is the first of its kind in the market and lets customers access up-to-date, relevant information and reports at their fingertips. They can now keep track of their contract remotely and ensure that process efficiency and performance is maximised. The site

is fully intuitive and easy-to-use and data feeds are automatically entered from our system on a weekly and monthly basis."

Ian Watson, procurement director, Mears Group, said, "As an existing Integrated Services customer, the management information presented in this way is world-class. The portal acts as an additional incentive for us to give more business to Wolseley as it makes reviewing our KPIs so much easier."

Nigel Harris, delivery manager for asset management, Walsall Housing Group, said, "I was really pleased to see the portal in action. It is a fantastic tool for our organisation to use; not only does it allow us to drill down into the operative reporting but will subsequently enhance the productivity of our trade colleagues."

iHousing launched by City West Housing

City West Housing Trust has joined the growing number of housing providers with online customer portals following the recent launch of its iHousing service.

iHousing gives registered tenants access to a self-service area within the CWHT website where they can check rent statements and make payments online. Along with reporting repairs via the site, tenants can also track the progress of reported repairs.

Paul Carhart, director of corporate services, City West Housing Trust, said, "We've had great feedback about the service. Many people already use online services to pay bills and manage their affairs so we are delighted that we have been able to introduce this simple system to support our customers."

Cestria develops mobile tenant app for £2,500

Cestria Community Housing has just launched its own app to give its tenants access to a range of services via their smartphones. The app cost only £2,500 to develop, with on-going costs of just £150 per year.

The app, which is free to download on iPhone and Android devices, lets Cestria's tenants report repairs, pay their rent, report anti-social behaviour, calculate benefits, access financial advice, see all the latest news from Cestria and access a range of its publications.

The app has also been designed so that it is not just for tenants to use. Non-tenants can

use the app to report anti-social behaviour, participate in Cestria events or receive free financial and benefits advice.

Gail Pattison, head of support services, Cestria Community Housing, said, "The app not only provides our tenants with the facility to pay their rent but it also lets them access a range of services and all the latest news and information from Cestria. The app is also available to non tenants and although we will continue to develop it, the feedback we have received has been very positive."

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Thinking differently

Digital inclusion – Moving from 'why' to 'how'

Dana Tobak, Managing Director, Hyperoptic

The issue of digital inclusion in social housing reached its peak last year, when former Housing Minister Grant Shapps pledged to abolish the digital apartheid at the 'Digital by Default' summit. However, ten months on, half of all council and housing association tenants in England still do not have a broadband connection. Evidently, the debate needs to move away from the benefits of an online broadband connection for tenants, to whose responsibility it is to enable widespread connectivity and how they can make this happen.

First, it needs to be said that broadband connectivity will also benefit the housing providers themselves. Analyst company Analysys Mason goes so far to say that rental incomes will be at risk if housing providers do not develop a robust strategy to promote the take-up of broadband services ahead of the introduction of universal credit.

One medium-sized housing provider, with a rental income of around £50 million, estimated that it stood to lose around £5 million per year in unpaid rent as a result of the reforms. This risk could be reduced if tenants could pay their rent online using broadband access from their own homes. In fact, estimates suggest that housing providers could save up to £340 million by providing their tenants with the means to report repairs or pay rent online. We therefore believe that the onus is on the housing providers to enable the broadband connection.

Minimising costs & maximising availability

If housing providers are to take the lead, where should they start? It's understandable that they will want to minimise their own financial and resourcing costs while maximising the availability of affordable broadband services to their tenants. By agreeing the objectives of their digital strategies, housing providers can plan accordingly to ensure that any financial outlay will enable a long-term return on investment. With that in mind, there are three main areas that housing providers should consider in order to develop a broadband strategy:

- Enabling a connection – retrofitting a connection into older properties and specifying a connection in new properties;
- Paying for the connection – in some cases the housing provider will cover the cost of the connection by incorporating it into the standard affordable rent package, in others they subsidise the connection;
- Encouraging usage of the connection – this is particularly true with the more vulnerable tenants who may need the benefits of connectivity explained.

Enabling the connection is a first step. Given current subscriber levels, it is clear that this cannot be left to the market or to tenants. Relying on tenants to contact suppliers directly is not adequate, especially in areas of poor connectivity where a robust connection is not viable in the first place. Housing providers need to work with service providers through a formal procurement process to agree a relationship that can give residents a guaranteed and future-proofed service.

Fibre to the home

One option that many housing providers are considering is plugging fibre-optic broadband straight into the premises which will enable tenants to choose whatever broadband package suits their needs. Installation is very simple and is even easier if it is done in tandem with other works, whether upgrading an IRS, cabling work or even a standard refurbishment.

The process for fitting the building with fibre can be done quickly via a two stage process. The first stage is to plug fibre-optic cable into the existing building ducts and then take the cable up the risers to each floor and across the ceiling voids. This work can normally be done in a matter of weeks. The second stage is to fit the connection in each flat in a position the end user prefers; upwards of 10-15 installations can be done per day.

The installation costs are negligible. In addition to the benefits to tenants, fibre-to-the-premises can be hugely advantageous for building services. The housing provider can use the fibre connectivity for a host of exciting applications, such as IP-CCTV,

smart metering and door-entry systems, which will help with the RoI of a fibre-to-the-premises project.

The added benefit of choosing a full fibre solution is that the connection will be future-proofed for years to come. This is in line with recent recommendations from ex-Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who outlined his vision for the UK to have the fastest broadband of any major European country by 2015, which he said would be achieved by a fibre-to-the-premises strategy, with fibre-to-the-cabinet being only a temporary measure. As such it is logical for housing providers to choose a solution that will serve both themselves and their tenants for the long haul.

Encouraging adoption

Once the connection is available, the final hurdle is encouraging adoption. This will not be a problem for the majority of tenants; it is expected that tenants will gain £530 million in annual consumer savings as a result of enhancing employability with IT skills, connecting people to jobs and online shopping savings.

The main issue to address with adoption is encouraging more vulnerable tenants and digital novices to use and benefit from digital services. There are many options available to housing providers in this area, notably recruiting digital champions among tenants and developing an internal programme to recruit volunteers to support these digital champions. They can also join Race Online 2012 which has free resources via a 1,500+ partner network.

As broadband increasingly becomes the fourth utility, the digital divide that is blocking social mobility for millions of tenants must be addressed. In this digital era, connectivity is a necessity rather than a luxury. Addressing the issue needn't be a financial or logistical nightmare. By focusing the digital strategy on a clear set of objectives, housing providers can take the lead and put in place a state-of-the-art infrastructure that even exceeds what is available in the private sector – and is future-proofed for years to come.

Dana Tobak is managing director of Hyperoptic.

Digital inclusion service from CableCom

CableCom Networking, a Bristol-based internet service provider, is launching a new digital inclusion service for housing providers, comprising broadband access alongside a range of landlord and tenant services.

The LivingCom service gives tenants fast, affordable and fully supported internet access with no hidden costs and a range of optional media and communication services such as television options, online movies, file backup and web security. For housing providers, CableCom said that LivingCom helps them to improve tenant communications, increase incremental revenues and reduce the number of 'walk in' offices and locations.

As well as providing services to Thames Valley Housing, Cosmopolitan Homes and Viridian Housing, CableCom is already well established in the student accommodation market and delivers broadband, television, telephony and other internet services to 200,000 students across 600 sites.

A spokesperson for CableCom said, "We work with the housing provider to provide the best price for the end user and the housing provider will make varying contributions based on their knowledge of existing tenants and potential price points. For example, in many instances the landlord will include a base service within the cost of the rent."

Waltham Forest's annual £165,000 savings with Home Connections

London Borough of Waltham Forest has introduced automated online registrations for its housing applications with Home Connections and is now making direct savings £165,000 per year.

Before the introduction of the Home Connections service, Waltham Forest had to manually process countless paper applications, many of which were from applicants it could never hope to house, and frequently accompanied by processing backlogs. The cost of the paper-based process was also hard to justify; SOCITM calculated that it costs public sector companies £8.23 per face-to-face transaction, £3.21 per telephone-based transaction and just 39p per online transaction.

The automated online registration service now gives prospective tenants an instant needs assessment, bedroom eligibility and likely waiting times. The service has also drastically reduced the need for manual processing of applications, resulting in annual cash savings of £165,000.

Nigel Thornton, head of housing solutions, London Borough of Waltham Forest, said, "We introduced Home Connections' online registration and change of circumstances package and this has completely changed how we process housing applications. We removed the change of circumstances backlog at a stroke and introduced a single process that improved customer satisfaction through instant housing priority calculation and status update."

Home Connections reported that the cost of the project, which was completed at the end of last year, was a fraction of the permanent 'cashable' savings.

Orchard's customer dashboard at Coast & Country

As part of its implementation of Orchard's browser-based housing management system, Coast and Country Housing has also deployed the company's Customer Dashboard for 'broad and shallow' CRM and workflow.

The new tool replaces Coast and Country's previous paper- and Excel-based processes for recording customer contacts, both of which required substantial manual inputs, were hard to analyse and couldn't be reconciled with the customers' personal data already stored in the housing management system. Coast and Country therefore wanted a tool that could capture contact metrics as they happened and would allow other contextual workflows or tasks to be triggered automatically.

Coast and Country originally planned to develop the software itself but when Orchard's launch of the Customer Dashboard coincided with the housing provider's implementation of Orchard Housing, it decided that it would be more cost-effective to use the Customer Dashboard, alongside the benefits of immediate integration with Orchard Housing and ongoing technical support.

The implementation of the Customer Dashboard was completed in one day, with limited customisation done by Coast and Country's IT team to fine tune the security settings to enable only the required functionality.

Since the workflow functionality went live in July 2012, customer contact metrics are now captured as they happen with no extra effort involved, duplication of data has been removed, visibility of customer contacts is now company wide, and customer service has improved, particularly when the contact centre 'hands off' a call to the back office with appropriate screens automatically picking up context-sensitive data thus avoiding repeat questions to the customer.

Digital inclusion – A duty of care?

Andrew Henderson, Managing Director, Lanway

There's no denying the importance of digital inclusion. A quick Google search reveals an abundance of reports and statistics concerning the issue. With the broadband quality and coverage improving every day, it's an issue that will only grow in significance.

This initiative isn't just about creating technologically savvy tenants; it's about addressing the correlation between digital exclusion and social exclusion. It therefore falls clearly within a housing provider's remit due to their responsibility to help improve the standards of living for their tenants.

Of course, it's not just the tenants that stand to gain. By some estimations, getting tenants online can reduce housing providers' operational costs by up to £1,000 per year per resident; it's fair to say that digital inclusion is mutually beneficial for both parties.

Nuanced and well-planned solution

On the surface it appears to be a problem that is simple to solve as the only necessary requirements are network access and internet-ready devices. In reality it's an issue that requires a nuanced and well-planned solution.

Many housing providers have taken a rushed and somewhat simple approach to getting tenants online by merely fitting computers and installing broadband in tenants' houses or breakout areas. To be fair, if the yardstick is merely whether tenants have the ability to access the internet then this method cannot be faulted.

However, the inherent role of housing providers means that this isn't the case as their duty of care to tenants arguably extends to the realms of technology too.

Internet novices

For many tenants, the internet will be a completely new concept and a certain level of knowledge cannot be assumed. Questions as to whether it is up to the housing providers to provide more than just hardware, software and an internet connection are commonly discussed; should there be a complete package that includes both education and protection?

Once a means of getting online has been provided, it can be easy to view everything from then on as the tenant's concern. But as with the other amenities and services that housing providers already provide, ultimately online access and services could remain their responsibility.

There are several methods that can be employed to ensure tenants are protected. These techniques can safeguard residents from internet threats as well as monitor the point of origin of computer activity for illegal or inappropriate content.

Thin-client access

One tactic is to ensure computers are used solely for their correct purpose by providing thin clients to tenants rather than complete desktops. These clients rely on external servers for processing power and memory, all of which is controlled remotely. What this means is that housing providers can exert greater control over how the computer functions. They can tailor what residents can do on the devices, such as only providing a web browser for surfing the internet. Further benefits of this method lie in reduced cost as thin clients are much cheaper than desktop computers and all the client devices connected to the main server can be managed centrally.

Housing providers should also have a method of profiling users, ensuring each user has their own account complete with tailored security features. For example, younger residents shouldn't be able to access the same types of sites as adults. This becomes of particular importance when computers are stationed in public breakout areas, where any number of different users could require access.

Residents can be profiled through login credentials, allowing security features to be personalised depending on user characteristics. In public areas these could be given out each time a user wishes to use the computer, or for domestic devices each resident could be given their credentials when the computer is installed.

These login details should then correspond to particular security features, such as content filter settings. Content filters are used to block inappropriate websites to ensure user safety, whether this is dangerous in the sense of offensive, age-sensitive or harmful to the computer itself in terms of malware and viruses.

These filters can be regularly updated, particularly if outsourced to a third party who can proactively monitor and update the benchmarks.

End-user protection

The likes of anti-virus and anti-malware software also falls under the housing provider's remit. Although there are clear benefits in this for the housing provider, such as lower maintenance costs due to fewer infected devices, there's also a duty to the tenant.

This is certainly the case with an aggressive new strand of malware known as 'ransomware' which locks down computers, threatens police intervention and restricts access unless a fee is paid. As mentioned above, many residents will be naive and uneducated regarding internet threats and being infected with ransomware would cause distress and could cost money (if they were to pay the ransom).

Granted, advanced threats such as ransomware may be the exception but keeping up to date and protected from the latest online threats is an area that housing providers have a duty to keep on top of. Whether that's outsourced to a third party or undertaken in-house, it should be made a priority and actively addressed.

Away from risks and threats, there are also simple measures that housing providers can take to make it easier for residents when they are online. Homepages and bookmarks should be set to key resources – such as www.gov.uk and its subsidiary pages. This easy access to key sites will become even more important in April 2013 when universal credit is planned to be introduced and rent payments made online.

The issue of digital inclusion has been on housing providers' agendas for many years. However, rather than seeing it as a one-off task, it's crucial that it is viewed as a continuous responsibility. If implemented correctly, duty of care can be extended to the digital realm without it being a drain on resources.

Andrew Henderson is the managing director of Lanway.

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Centralised mapping at Places for People with Emapsite

Places for People has completed the deployment of a centralised geographic information and mapping system from Emapsite. The GIS now underpins activities such as site appraisals, stock rationalisation, demographic profiling and neighbourhood planning and is used by over 100 people across the housing provider's departments.

Clare Nolan, GIS analyst, Places for People, said, "Our GIS data use before 2008 was largely confined to desktop licences but it wasn't centralised. There was therefore a great opportunity to use a central GIS to organise and disseminate outputs based on mapping data, census information, demographics and Land Registry data.

"For example, one of the main tasks of our housing advice team is to provide information to people looking for specific types of housing in different locations. To help with that, we wanted to support the team by showing where, for instance, we had sheltered housing schemes. We knew that with GIS, we could combine the locations of those schemes with other data such as deprivation indices, house price variations, census statistics and neighbourhood profile planning to make it appear as though the team had local knowledge which potential customers value."

At the start of 2012, Places for People needed additional geographic datasets to strengthen its GIS and so reviewed the ways in which key datasets such as OS MasterMap were bought, managed and maintained. Emapsite was then chosen to provide the data as well as an online web mapping service (WMS) to

access the data. Emapsite's WMS provides instant access to the latest Ordnance Survey mapping including OS MasterMap and the datasets available through OS Open data such as BoundaryLine, StreetView, 1:250,000 and MiniScale.

Nolan said, "It helps us pre-qualify people for the waiting list and stop those going on the list who, for whatever reason, wouldn't ultimately meet the criteria. Having that filter at the start reduces administration later on, and for those who do qualify, the GIS helps us populate their application forms and call up all the information that is available for their location."

The housing provider is currently running a two-year, region-by-region project to map all of its external assets. Using the GIS, staff can quickly align map data and aerial photography with Land Registry data to visualise boundary lines and geographic extents. Features such as grass cover, trees, bushes and hard-standing structures can be identified and mapped.

Nolan said, "The GIS will potentially save us a lot of money on grounds maintenance projects by enabling us to more accurately describe what needs maintaining on an estate, its current condition and what works are needed.

"We can also buy very small amounts of data, such as from OS MasterMap, as and when we need them. There is no minimum order and they can be consolidated as required. You simply draw a box round the data and download it for what you need."

Midland Heart standardises on Cadcorp GIS

Cadcorp has been chosen to standardise all of Midland Heart's GIS and mapping applications including the replacement of the housing provider's original desktop-based GIS.

James Jervis from Midland Heart said, "Housing providers continually have to balance the need to generate social as well as financial returns. GIS helps us deliver against both sets of obligations. Although we have been using GIS for a number of years, its use was limited to a few specialist staff who had desktop GIS software. We recognised that we needed a web-based application if we wanted to enable all staff to visualise internal and external datasets geographically."

Midland Heart selected Cadcorp technology to provide not only the web mapping application but also to replace its existing desktop GIS. The new combined system will now manage

the location of properties, Land Registry title polygons and land use data against background data sets which will include OS OpenData and OS MasterMap.

Jervis said, "We had two fundamental requirements. The first was that the web mapping application should be easy to use and the second was that it should be convenient to administer without the need for external involvement. Cadcorp Web Map Layers met both of these requirements.

"We didn't set out to standardise on one GIS technology. We were open to proposals for web mapping applications which would co-exist with our current desktop GIS but we found that Cadcorp would allow us to coexist in the short term before eventually migrating to a standardised infrastructure."

GIS strategy at Aster with Esri

Aster Group is making location-based analysis technology a central part of its strategic decision-making processes following its implementation of a GIS system from Esri. The project began in August 2010 focusing on better customer service through to summer 2012 covering fuel poverty mapping.

In common with many housing providers, Aster's previous use of GIS was limited to isolated pockets within the group with no consistency across its operations, involving a mixture of paper maps, desktop GIS and limited data sharing and collaboration. The new Esri system, dubbed AsterMaps, spans housing management, asset management and repairs, with Aster reporting that use of AsterMaps has increased by 50 per cent over the last year as more of its staff realise the benefits of geographic and spatial analysis.

Roy Thompson, IT director, Aster Group, said, "We focused on delivering practical functionality so we could quickly demonstrate the benefits of GIS and not be distracted by 'vapourware'. Each GIS project offers immediate tangible benefits in terms of operational efficiency and cost savings."

The widespread use of AsterMaps has made it easier for Aster's developers to find new sites on which to build homes and allowed its front-line staff to respond to tenant queries 50 per cent faster. The system also enables better resident profiling, with the result that the average age of 'involved residents' has been reduced by 10 years, and by bringing mapping in-house, grounds maintenance costs have been reduced, such as saving £80,000 on tree survey data.

Andy Bradley, business systems analyst for GIS, Aster Group, said, "Through the new GIS approach with Esri, we've given all staff better access to interactive mapping and increased the type of tasks they can perform. In the past, maps and GIS were just a by-product and something we had to have. Today, GIS has moved centre stage and is core to the way we operate."

Aster originally spent around £68,000 on hardware, software, training, consultancy and data. Compared with the housing provider's annual spending on GIS, it is now saving around £20,000 per year, based on more cost-effective GIS contracts, replicating datasets internally and removing some unnecessary data services, but not including the operational efficiency savings or staff time saved from the new GIS-related projects.

Mike McCarthy, operations director, Aster Property, said, "GIS has fundamentally changed the way we deliver our asset management strategy. From managing our repairs and planned maintenance programmes, through to mapping our estates' performance in support of our wider stock options appraisals, we couldn't do without it."
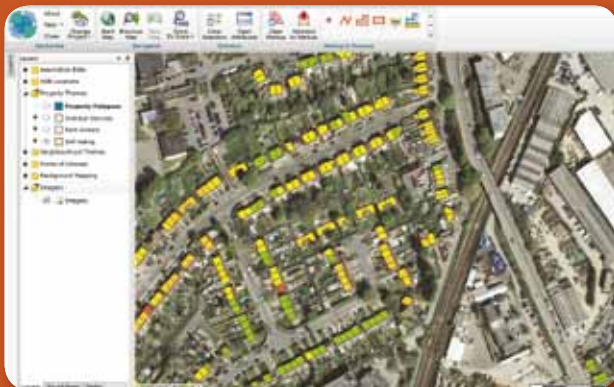
First Wessex gets GIS intranet from GeoSolveIT

First Wessex is in the middle of implementing an intranet-based GIS from GeoSolveIT. GeoSamba for Housing will be available to all staff across First Wessex's offices. First Wessex has just completed its administrators' training on the GIS product, with the system expected to be live in January 2013.

The contract includes full deployment of GeoSamba for Housing, integration with First Wessex's housing management system, integration of Ordnance Survey mapping and staff training. Distributed via First Wessex's intranet, the new GIS service will provide a range of geographic and location-based information accessed against Ordnance Survey mapping and information from its housing management system.

Justin Chamberlin, GIS manager, First Wessex, said, "The key factors for choosing GeoSamba for Housing were not only its affordability, but also the ease of data integration, which is essential in order to give staff up-to-date information. We were also surprised by the ease and speed of deployment.

"The ability to distribute all our information in a dynamic and easily-maintained manner direct from our housing management system will ensure that the GIS forms an integral part of our information reporting systems and reduces the time spent delivering the right information to our various teams, management, boards and committees."

Data as a corporate asset

Chris Coan, Managing Director, Visualmetrics

How embracing new technologies can help with controlling and managing the changes in welfare reform, universal credit and Digital by Default.

The need for 'information insight' in all organisations is a constant demand from the business and a perennial problem for IT. However, the basic building blocks of 'people, process & technology' have always been available; it is the challenge of harmonising these elements in a coordinated way with the focus, priority and derived benefit that are the constraints. With the pending policy changes relating to welfare reform and universal credit in particular, the need for more timely and accurate information insight will become imperative.

If we then overlay this with the information revolution caused by the internet, social media and business networking, the explosion in both structured and unstructured data multiplies and magnifies the business and IT challenges of making sense of how a business is operating and how the effective use of information insight can drive positive performance change. When you factor in decentralised business operations and expectations of 24/7 customer service then we have some significant shifts in the supply and demand equation that makes a business, the products and services it offers, and the expectations of clients, investors, and regulators an enormous challenge for all businesses.

Do or die

Those that can do, and those that can't or don't will die. This is an old business adage but proven to be historically true across all sectors; just look at the changes to RIM and Nokia within less than two years. So how do housing providers ensure that they positively manage the welfare reform bill and universal credit, enhanced customer service expectations, and embrace Digital by Default, and ensure they manage their financial and human resources in an increasingly competitive market? Embrace IT products that are proven, and can be applied across the separate strands of the business, but what are those IT products?

The massive growth in both structured and unstructured data, driven by the internet and social media and the pending digital inclusion explosion, can be effectively interpreted and exploited from a business context using the 'in memory' technologies that companies such as SAP offer with its High Performance Analytical Appliance (HANA). These platforms allow real-time interpretation of huge amounts of data and allow KPI-based interpretation by business users at all levels.

Information on the go

As business operations become more decentralised and based on multiple devices, information on the go becomes more necessary. Mobile information insight through smartphones and tablets will be effective ways to increase customer service and enhance operational efficiency, and therefore positively impact operational cost management. We are seeing an increase in BYOD (bring you own device) in the housing sector and this increases the challenges for IT staff who have a duty of care in the context of both device and business data management. As with all these aspects of information insight, the ability to align and integrate, rather than having disparate point products, can make the overall solution more operationally and financially efficient.

Finally, the use of visualisation for information insight, specifically for knowledge workers and senior executives, allows people to set visual information triggers based on business goals and objectives, using the power of the data and software to provide insightful and proactive views of business trends in real-time scenarios. It fulfils the promise of user self-service in a timely manner, thereby enabling real time, accurate and informed decisions to be taken.

Data is now a corporate asset and technology is the true enabler. Those that can do, and those that can't or don't will die.

Chris Coan is the managing director of Visualmetrics.

Town & Country Housing reviews infrastructure with Sovereign

Bob Heapy, CEO, Town and Country Housing Group

Town and Country Housing Group has chosen Sovereign Business Integration Group to review its IT infrastructure and recommend improvements. The independent review was prompted by the need to upgrade TCHG's disparate IT systems running across its operations in 16 local authority areas in the South East of England.

Sovereign has undertaken an IT health check and will be giving TCHG a report outlining recommendations and advice to improve and increase efficiency across the organisation through suggested changes to its IT infrastructure.

Bob Heapy, CEO, Town and Country Housing Group, explains, "We knew that Sovereign would give us an honest and independent report on our current systems and processes and provide recommendations on what we could do to improve and upgrade them. It was also important that the review was undertaken in a manner that would have the least impact on our staff."

Sabre Resource Management is an established career consultancy with a proven track record within the Housing sector. For over 10 years we have enabled our clients to source high calibre professionals across Technology, Finance, Asset Management and Support.

We offer the following services:

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- Business Mediation and Conflict Resolution

If you are considering your next move or indeed seeking new talent for your team, then why not come for a walk with us and let us see what we can discover.

"Spencer and Amy at Sabre have added huge value to Family Mosaic as a strategic recruitment partner. All suppliers should give good service these days; but finding a recruitment agency like Sabre who have taken the time to really understand our business, and who have the vision to work with us to support and develop our long term plans is not so easy. Working strategically with Sabre has ensured Family Mosaic now has a clear, concise, appropriate, and real value adding team development strategy/approach. Spencer and Amy always go the extra mile and our organisations have more than a purely business relationship – we have a true value adding business partnership."

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ROCC wins £278,000 ICT deal with Connect Housing

Connect Housing has awarded ROCC a £278,000 contract for a complete information and communications technology architecture for the next five years, beginning at the end of this year. The contract was awarded as part of a 'competitive dialogue' tendering process involving 47 UK technology suppliers.

Under the contract, Connect's IT infrastructure is being migrated to a virtual VMware server and SAN architecture, with back-up and recovery from ROCC's datacentre in Surrey, alongside fibre links and power-over-Ethernet where needed. Connect's existing desktop PCs will be virtualised and updates made to its current thin-client devices. Connect's security and resilience requirements will be met through the use of Exchange 2010, Active Directory and disk encryption.

GENERAL NEWS

Habinteg Housing seeks ICT proposals

As part of a pan-European project, Habinteg Housing Association is looking for ICT suppliers to put forward products or services designed to make life easier for older and disabled people. Submissions will be considered for inclusion in a new database of resources as part of the European I-stay@home project in which Habinteg is the UK partner.

The I-stay@home project is part funded by the EU via the European Regional Development Fund to identify, select and test a range of affordable ICT solutions that can assist disabled and older people to continue living independently in their homes.

The first phase of project has identified how tenants feel ICT solutions can help them, as well as some of the barriers to using such technology. This second phase aims to identify technologies that are currently available. Some products and services will then be live tested with tenants so that the project team can produce a guide to the most effective technologies from a social landlord's perspective. In its final phase the project will produce an online catalogue of ICT products and suppliers for use by housing providers and the general public.

Glen Joseph, I-stay@home project manager, Habinteg Housing Association, said, "This is a great opportunity for companies to get their products and services talked about. We're really looking forward to finding out how tenants get on with the new technologies and which products have the best potential to make a difference to their lives."

Companies with relevant products or services can submit them to the I-stay@home project via **www.habinteg.org.uk.**

Arena wins top place on PfH consortium

Arena Group has won a four-year contract with the National Procurement for Housing Consortium as the recommended supplier of 'photocopiers, printers and multi-functional devices (MFD)' and 'office-based managed print services (MPS)'.

Wendy Griffiths, category manager from PfH, said, "Arena impressed us very much with their tender submission.

They answered questions to a very high standard and gave an excellent reflection of the company and its capabilities. I am looking forward to working with Arena and have every confidence they will provide an excellent service to PfH Members."

A2Dominion declares interest with Parabola

A2Dominion Group has completed the automation of its annual Declaration of Interests processes using a SharePoint-based system from Parabola Software.

As part of its corporate governance, A2Dominion requires all employees, board members and other individuals related to the organisation to complete a Declaration of Interests form once a year as well as whenever their DoI information changes. However, with around 900 employees in almost 70 offices across London and Southern England, the housing provider's governance team found that keeping track of these and other forms using a paper-based system was a significant administrative burden and wanted to move to an electronic system to record, track, approve and retain DoI forms without the need for manual scrutiny.

SharePoint 2010 was chosen as the automation platform as it was already in the pipeline as the replacement for A2Dominion's intranet, with Parabola Software chosen to build the automated DoI application based on A2Dominion's previous relationship with them.

Richard Gray, managing director, Parabola Software, said, "As well as being a great collaboration platform, SharePoint is very extensible. When companies are using SharePoint as the platform for staff communication or HR processes, there is often a good business case for running a purpose-built application on the same platform."

The content of the DoI form and approval status for each employee is now completely handled by the application which makes extensive use of SharePoint workflows and tasks. Every employee's Active Directory account is used by SharePoint to authorise their use of the application, and email alerts are used to remind those who haven't completed their DoI form. Most people complete their DoI form without any need for managers to chase them but if the alert is ignored for a certain amount of time, a further reminder will be sent and eventually the issue will be escalated to the individual's manager or finally A2Dominion's governance team.

A2Dominion reported that retrieving and reporting the DoI information is now much easier as all the completed forms are held in a central database. Security is also much better; compared with the paper-based system where a form left on somebody's desk could be read by anybody, the new solution restricts access to each staff member and their manager.

Trevor Whittaker, head of business systems, A2Dominion Group, said, "The use of intelligent workflows has the potential to improve additional Group processes as demonstrated by our success with the Declaration of Interest management. Taking away the burden of paper management simplifies and improves the way we work."

Richmond Housing's ambassadors for online safety

Richmond Housing at the European Call Centre & Customer Service Awards

Three Richmond Housing Partnership employees have completed 'ambassador' training through the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) centre to help keep young people safe online. RHP says that it is the first housing provider to take part in CEOP training to provide advice and support to its customers.

The CEOP Centre is part of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). It works with agencies across the UK to promote safe online practice to reduce cyber-bullying and the sexual abuse of children.

Ian Whiteway, head of ASB, Richmond Housing Partnership, said, "This is a great opportunity to raise awareness about the issue of internet safety across our area. Our aim is to make our customers more confident about the steps they can take to protect their loved ones online, and to give strong guidance and support for all ages when it comes to surfing the net."

Richmond Housing will soon begin training local Police and council representatives on how to promote online safety as well as visiting schools and voluntary groups across Richmond and Hounslow. This follows a partnership with Microsoft volunteers earlier this year to deliver presentations on key online safety messages to Mears operatives and other local agencies.

Award-winning customer service
Richmond Housing has been awarded 'small contact centre of the year' at the European Call Centre and Customer Service Awards 2012.

Jonathan Creaser, head of ICT, Richmond Housing Partnership, said, "We feel our hard-working contact centre team has received the recognition it deserves with this award. Listening to customers and front line teams has enabled us to deliver an exceptional level of customer service.

"Our NEC unified communications system has helped us build better customer relationships, especially with the preferred agent feature which directs callers to the person they spoke to previously. If the contact centre is particularly busy, the number of agents can be expanded by diverting calls to other extensions in the building. In exceptional cases, if a call is not answered within 30 seconds the customer can request a call back."

Housing Technology 2013 – getting better and better

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SOVEREIGN BUSINESS INTEGRATION GROUP

Sir Clive Woodward to give keynote presentation at Housing Technology 2013

As we get closer to our annual conference and executive forum, the event is shaping up to be better than ever. Not only have we confirmed more speakers and sponsors, we have also added another keynote presenter.

John Bird, founder and editor-in-chief of the Big Issue, will give a typically 'trenchant and robust' talk during the pre-event evening drinks reception, followed by the keynote presentation from Sir Clive Woodward OBE, World Cup Winner and Team GB's Director of Sport for the London Olympics, during the main conference.

The fourth annual Housing Technology conference and executive forum will take place at the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry on Thursday 21 February 2013, combined with a pre-event drinks reception on the previous evening.

As with our three previous conferences, Housing Technology 2013 will be intentionally exclusive, combing a wealth of exclusive presentations, lots of informal networking with 200+ senior business & IT housing executives, and an exhibition of 20+ technology suppliers and consultancies. Those who have been before will know that our conferences are pretty busy and feature jam-packed schedules, but they do enable delegates, speakers, sponsors & exhibitors to cover a lot of ground in one day.

With the event currently sponsored by Aareon, BT, ConvergeOne, Equanet, JMC IT, MET and Sovereign Business Integration Group, the latest presentations include:

- **Aareon -** The changing role of IT
- **Accent Group -** Modernising a complete ICT infrastructure
- **Adactus Housing -** New ways of working & internal staff management
- **Affinity Sutton -** Mobile working in caretaking, grounds maintenance and bulk refuse collections
- **Alliance Homes -** Asset management infrastructure review
- **Ashton Pioneer Homes -** Social media, customer service and tenant engagement
- **BT -** Topic to be confirmed
- **Circle -** From reactive support to proactive customer engagement
- **City West Housing Trust -** Delivering value for money through cost reductions and new tenant services
- **CityWest Homes -** Digital fibre to the home
- **ConvergeOne -** Topic to be confirmed
- **Equanet -** Topic to be confirmed
- **First Wessex -** Value for money, procurement, e-tendering and regulatory compliance
- **Gallions Housing -** Direct experience of Sharepoint in social housing
- **Gentoo Group -** Mobile working in neighbourhoods and customer premises
- **Havebury Housing -** In-house portal development for repairs operatives using HTML5, CSS and JavaScript
- **Haven Refuge -** Weathering a storm – Big systems for a small housing provider
- **Hyde Housing -** How to implement IT strategy into an organisation
- **Isos Housing -** Virtualisation and mobile working
- **JMC IT -** IT as an enabler for change within housing
- **MET -** Topic to be confirmed
- **North Lincolnshire Homes -** Welfare reform, digital inclusion and delivering new commercial broadband services
- **Orbit Group -** Social business – The role of technology as an enabler of business transformation
- **Peabody -** The role of social housing in bridging the digital divide
- **Riverside Group -** Business information reporting for performance management
- **Solihull Community Housing -** Getting serious about online repairs
- **Sovereign Business Integration Group -** Topic to be confirmed
- **Sovereign Housing -** Balancing in-house and external solutions to transform IT services and deliver a five-year business strategy
- **Thames Valley Housing -** Fishing where the fishes are – online customer engagement
- **Thrive Homes -** Moving from 'keeping the lights on' IT to an outsourced model for continuous business improvement
- **Together Housing Group -** Doing IT together – Delivering business efficiencies with a new HMS
- **Trafford Housing Trust -** Transforming internal and external communication through social media
- **Viridian Housing -** Technology-led change and adapting the role of IT
- **West Kent Housing -** Welfare reform, universal credit and digital inclusion
- **Worcester Community Housing -** Beyond the usual suspects – Expanding, enhancing and rewarding customer participation
- **Wulvern Housing -** Universal credit, digital inclusion and tenant profiling
- **Ymere Housing & F-fectis -** The new way of working

Housing Technology 2013 – getting better and better

Continued from previous page

John Bird, founder and editor-in-chief of The Big Issue

Pre-event evening drinks reception

After the success of the 2012 pre-event drinks reception, we are holding another one the night before the main 2013 event, also at the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry. All speakers, delegates, sponsors and exhibitors are invited to this reception.

As mentioned previously, John Bird, founder and editor-in-chief of The Big Issue, has agreed to give an exclusive talk during the reception. At a time when corporate social responsibility is preoccupying business leaders and consumers alike, John Bird offers an authoritative and fresh approach and some original perspectives on the interaction of business and society. His diverse experience, combined with his exuberant personality, erudition and often trenchant views make him a compelling and very entertaining speaker.

Book now
Delegate bookings are coming in fast and the event is filling up so please don't miss out on what we are confident will be a fascinating and very enjoyable event – visit **www.housing-technology.com/conference** to find out more and to reserve your place.

Cadarn's Dutch trip

Richard Troote, Head of IS, Cadarn Housing Group & Chair of Community Housing Cymru

In the July Issue of Housing Technology Henk Korevaar from the Dutch housing IT consultancy F-fectis invited senior IT professionals to a study trip to the Netherlands. I accepted the invitation and travelled to Utrecht in September to the Corporatie Plein 2012, the leading Dutch conference for housing associations.

On arrival, Henk introduced me to Mea Kessler, the Chair of NetwIT, who explained the CORA and VERA publications; these documents define standards for the housing process and the interfaces between different applications and core housing management systems. Originally started by just eleven housing providers, the standards are now becoming a core requirement when purchasing new applications in The Netherlands.

The NetwIT members set up zones throughout the conference where you could sit and discuss a variety of topics. Some of the highlights which may be relevant to UK housing providers included:

- **Benchmarking –** NetwIT has developed a value-added ICT benchmarking model and encourages members to explain the differences between the costs of service delivery rather than simply display a graph.
- **Bring your own device (BYOD) –** The employees of Havensteder Housing Association in Rotterdam were given the chance to buy their own laptops and are paid an allowance for using them at work. This has reduced the reliance on the internal IT department to support those machines.
- **CORA/VERA –** As mentioned above, these standards are being adopted by suppliers and make the selection of new software easier. Suppliers are now expected to have the core functionality and must show what extra their software does to win business.
- **Tablets and social media –** Thuisvester Housing Association in Oosterhout has replaced many of its laptops and desktops with tablet devices. It has opted for Apple products rather than Android-based ones due to restrictions on application downloads. AlleeWonen Housing Association in Roosendaal uses social media not only to push information to tenants but also to 'listen' to tenant voices; no topic or service is off limits and tenants may request any service from applications such as Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp. Success is measured by followers rather than 'likes' and all staff are encouraged to monitor and respond directly to tenants, and the company no longer use paper to communicate with tenants. Frmwrk showed how it uses software to analyse and report on trends in social media activity.
- **Outsourcing ICT –** Many organisations are going through difficult times with reduced budgets and redundancies and this is affecting the back office and ICT in particular. Some are responding by outsourcing; Peter Paffen from Ieder1 Housing Association in Deventer is the only IT-related employee managing the outsourcing contract and SAP implementation.

This was an extremely interesting visit, looking at the IT challenges in the Dutch housing sector and some useful insights into how they are approaching delivering services to tenants. The CORA/VERA work will resonate with many ICT managers in the UK as this has been discussed previously at Housing Technology's conferences.

For my part, I will be taking the benchmarking forward with colleagues in an attempt to improve the model and show how we add value.

Many of the NetwIT members will be at the IT in Housing conference in London this month and I am sure they will be more than happy to follow up these and other themes.

Richard Troote is head of IS at Cadarn Housing Group and Chair of Community Housing Cymru.

A new era of governance

Jacqui Stoggall, Director of Consultancy, Sovereign Business Integration Group

The social housing sector is once again facing an upheaval in both regulatory climate and strategic direction, from the Homes and Community Agency's self-regulatory model and emphasis on financial performance, value for money and national consistency, to the government's clear drive towards creating a self-financing social housing sector.

From the way services are provided to tenants to the way business transformation projects are delivered and new IT systems procured, if housing providers are to operate effectively in the new environment a robust governance model is required.

Housing providers need to apply new rigour to attain value for money from IT, from evolving their existing infrastructures to respond to new demands such as universal credit, to improving procurement and contract structure, and ensuring IT investment meets the requirements of strategic business improvement plans.

Regulatory change

The housing sector has proven resilient in the face of the global financial crisis to date. However, the landscape for housing providers is now changing radically. From the introduction of universal credit to the reduction in public funding and the need to expand service delivery beyond their core housing activities, housing providers are having to adapt fast.

A new governance model is at the heart of these changes. The Homes and Community Agency's regulatory framework is now placing the onus on housing providers to demonstrate robust financial viability and sustainability. Furthermore, the social housing regulator is demanding housing providers do more to achieve value for money, after finding it cannot account for variations of almost a third in costs between different providers.

At the same time, organisations are under pressure from stakeholders to increase accountability, improve efficiency, and deliver an effective range of services that supports tenants and delivers new revenue streams.

Effective processes

This move towards greater accountability combined with a clear government commitment to reduce public funding and create a self-sufficient housing sector will demand significant operational, structural and personnel change. From reinvigorating plans for shared service delivery to demanding significant business transformation, the challenge for housing organisations is have the right structure and skills to support both accountability and value for money.

Improved governance extends from the creation of new boards of directors, through the delivery of major business improvement projects (which should include top level management and close collaboration with IT), to the next tier of service delivery management.

To support the new structure, housing organisations require a far more robust culture of performance management, exploiting business intelligence tools that can deliver both day-to-day operational key performance indicator (KPI) monitoring and on-going strategic performance measurement. It is only by achieving end-to-end performance management that organisations will be able to deliver not only the financial metrics demanded by the HCA but also the softer, customer-led metrics that will remain key to supporting service delivery improvements.

Technology and service procurement

One of the most significant areas of change is the way in which housing providers procure technology and services. After a decade of somewhat anarchic investments, with organisations typically exploiting one-off solutions to achieve specific objectives, under new governance models the sector needs to create a much more strategic approach to IT adoption and investment.

This should start with an in-depth assessment of the current technology investment in conjunction with business improvement objectives. Once the strategy has been developed and key areas of IT investment identified, there are opportunities to adopt cleverer procurement processes – albeit within the confines of EU procurement law. To attain the best result, it is important to understand these options and choose the most effective route to achieve best value and work with suppliers that demonstrate relevant market experience and expertise.

For example, while a straightforward tender process is designed for the purchase of an off-the-shelf software solution, a housing provider could opt to use Competitive Dialogue for less-defined requirements such as an outsourced IT service. The use of Competitive Dialogue in this environment helps the organisation to shape the content and context of the service required through on-going discussions with potential vendors and achieve a service that is fit for purpose.

By improving both the understanding of technology requirements, including the link between business improvement projects and technology needs, and the way in which technology is procured, housing providers can attain the critical evolution from a tactical to strategic approach to IT that will drive the long-term value for money requirements.

Vendor role

This change in attitude should also demand new levels of governance from IT vendors. Excellence in IT will underpin many aspects of new service delivery and governance transparency and the onus is on vendors to demonstrate the value of the investment. Benefit realisation plans should become a core component of the overall technology assessment process, even if the benefits may not be realised during the lifetime of that vendor's contract, to ensure the organisation is following its strategic direction and addressing requirements for value for money.

IT vendors can also play an important role in facilitating shared services with neighbouring organisations. Critically, this does not have to be limited to other housing providers. As the social housing market increasingly looks at service diversification in order to provide tenants with access to a raft of additional services, there is an opportunity for the housing provider to act as a single centralised function for a number of local service delivery organisations.

Conclusion

In some ways, the shift towards self-governance and a regulator focused on financial metrics rather than the more complex, customer service-led measures removes some of the pressure from the social housing sector. However, the reality is very different. With changes in welfare funding and a clear political move towards creating a self-funding sector, the onus is on housing providers to become far more strategic and to build partnerships and relationships with other local organisations. Strong governance across the organisation, from the board to the delivery of IT services and support, will be critical to effective operation in this new era of social housing provision.

Jacqui Stoggall is director of consultancy at Sovereign Business Integration Group.

Digital Unite launches self-study DI courses

Two new online courses have been launched by Digital Unite to provide housing staff and residents with the skills to help others access computers and the internet.

The Quick Start course, Helping Beginners Get (and Stay) Online, is a simple self-study course aimed at those with a basic working knowledge of technology. The course provides 10 hours of learning and is structured in seven engaging learning sections.

Complete with practical exercises and a certificate of completion, it covers how to create the right learning environment for beginners, what hardware, software and websites to use and how to create and maintain learner interest.

Lisa Denison, community investment director, Sovereign Housing Association, said, "It's cost effective to train people internally. If we invest that money in our own staff then they can then share that information with colleagues and work with residents, and each of those colleagues and residents can then go on to train other people."

Digital Unite also offers a more in-depth online course to develop formal Digital Champion skills. The Digital Champions ITQ is provided as part of the nationally-recognised Information Technology Qualifications framework and can lead to a City and Guilds qualification.

Aimed at those with a good understanding and knowledge of digital technologies, the course covers 16 topics such as the best use of Google, Skype, social media and blogging with practical tasks to complete. In addition the course covers promoting and sustaining digital learning in communities, working with partners and practical issues such as online safety.

Natalie Thyer, community investment assistant, Sovereign Housing Association, said, "I'd really recommend the Digital Champions course. I thought I already knew a lot, but now realise that there were big gaps in my knowledge. I am already using my new skills to support my team to reduce the social

isolation of many of the older people in our sheltered housing schemes and to involve younger people in the area's more deprived housing."

Emma Solomon, managing director, Digital Unite, said, "We know that better digital skills, from head-office staff to in-scheme staff and residents, have a huge impact on overall organisational efficiency as well as realising profound personal benefits such as a reduction in loneliness and isolation, personal cost savings and an enhanced sense of community and connectedness."

Southern IT Forum at Lloyds of London

The Southern IT Forum held its quarterly meeting at the Lloyds of London building on 20 September with a technology showcase hosted by TI Group. The showcase included presentations from Coraid, ZScaler and Nimble Storage.

The next SIT Forum meeting will be during the National Housing Federation's IT in

Housing conference later this month and will include a session on data protection. The SIT Forum has recently launched its new Yammer portal and has merged its online services with the Housing Association Data Protection Network.

'No match, no fee' service from House Exchange

House Exchange, a not-for-profit mutual exchange service, is letting tenants who want to swap their homes advertise their properties online without any upfront fees. Tenants now only pay for the service once they have found a potential swap. Around 1,800 tenants swap homes each month using House Exchange.

Kim Doran from House Exchange said, "We want to make House Exchange as accessible

as possible for housing providers and for tenants. Many people we work with are on low incomes. They don't know how long it will take to swap homes and they can be put off by the upfront costs traditionally levied by mutual exchange providers. Our 'no match, no fee' promise aims to resolve this problem and encourage more people to advertise their home."

Housing Technology at Conservative conference

George Grant, publisher of Housing Technology, was invited to attend the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham last month.

As well as attending various housing-related presentations and committees, he met the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, the newly-appointed Chairman of the Conservative party and ex-Housing Minister Grant Shapps, and the new Minister for Housing Mark Prisk.

Rocking technology

Dudes (deliberately not 'sir' – it's 2012 and technology rocks) – I'm curious, I'm insanely excited and I 'love' technology and what it can do for people. I 'love' the social housing sector, and what it can do 'with' people. There. I just thought I'd get that out in the open. Oh man, is this sector up for some disruption in the coming years. I could fill every available inch in your magazine with the great things we could do. But I'll pace myself. This is just the letters page after all.

One of the key objectives for our ICT strategy is enabling 'channel-shift'. 20 years ago, the housing sector delivered its services face-to-face, with lots of neighbourhood offices. Ten years ago, we made a shift to telephone contact centres. And now it's changing again as we take service delivery online. Properly online, not just that little 'check your repairs history and pay your rent' add-on to the website that we did a few years back. Let's do something that's engaging and compelling, something that is inherently human and social.

Can we turn customers into 'prosumers' (like Amazon's book reviewers)? Can we stimulate and capture customer feedback (like patientopinion.org.uk)? Can we set up local Freecycle networks? Can we respond to service requests raised on twitter (@virginmedia can)? What partnerships can we form to help our customers (we've partnered with myworksearch.co.uk to bring online job search help to all our customers who want it)?

Quite a tall order though, eh? Big embedded investment in core systems, internal skills and mindsets more aligned to corporate ICT projects and Prince2 than web-DNA and agile project management. Oh, but what fun. An opportunity to focus on 'yes and' instead of 'yes but'. Who's in? Find me on twitter and let's build a tribe of revolutionaries.

Jayne Hilditch (@jaynehilditch)
Corporate services director, Thames Valley Housing Association

Profiling for universal credit

Sir – With the introduction of universal credit looming large, it is more important than ever that housing providers clearly understand their tenants, particularly those considered high risk or vulnerable to these changes. In fact due to the added pressures introduced by the Welfare Reform Act, there is a social obligation to be able to effectively profile them in order to identify specific needs on a person-by-person basis. This follows on quickly from the highly politicised subject of sub-letting. In some cases, housing providers were slow to deal with this difficult subject. However under the Welfare Reform agenda, the repercussions of a lack of action in this area will have major financial implications through significantly reduced revenues.

This is more than just a cultural change within housing and while your software supplier may not have all the answers, they might have more than you think.

Wouldn't the following be a significant help? The ability to profile your tenants and to identify those 'high risk' individuals in order to mitigate that risk and give you the opportunity to provide the associated services to manage their specific needs; help in increasing your revenue collection through improved Direct Debit processes as well as providing sophisticated and secure revenue collection options; enhance the back-office capabilities within housing management systems to mitigate the effects of Welfare Reform.

While IT cannot solve all your universal credit headaches, it can help significantly in dealing with the impact and ensuring minimum disruption to your organisation. Why not ask you supplier what they can do? You never know, you might be surprised by the breadth of their offerings.

Jeff Hewitt
Managing director for housing, Civica

An appointment with productivity

Sir – From speaking with housing organisations their fundamental objective remains the same – to achieve more with less. While budgets continue to be tight, never before have I seen so much pressure on every aspect of social housing to deliver improved services to their residents.

We are seeing a growing trend for appointment booking and dynamic scheduling to be used by the full range of housing services in an attempt to drive productivity at the same time as delivering improved levels of service. This is not new to housing organisations, as it has played a major role in responsive repairs by increasing the number of appointments made and kept and the number of jobs completed per day.

We are now seeing a growing demand to implement corporate resource booking solutions across a wide range of housing services including allocations, estate management, homelessness and all types of property inspection. The drive for this is simple; to make the best use of people through the smart use of available time, and updating the schedule in real time with mobile technology. Not only is productivity increased but more time is spent with residents; enabling more to be delivered with less.

David Todd
Partnerships director, Xmbrace

Are consumer devices right for housing?

Sir – With the rise of the smartphone, the concept of mobile working has seen a significant uptake within housing organisations. Prior to this, PDAs were the height of mobile technology but with their limitations including a singular operating system, it meant they were kept mostly for routine jobs which didn't require much information capture. However, the last year has seen the launch of a variety of devices which have introduced unrivalled flexibility and capability for a wide range of mobile working functions.

You may now be able to do a lot on a consumer tablet or smartphone but can it stand up to being used as a tool day in, day out?

Most of us would probably confess to being avid users of tablets and smartphones during the working day but are they 'appropriate' mobile devices? This term 'appropriate' is becoming increasingly important to customers as they are bombarded with messages about the power of consumer mobile devices.

The conversation around what type of device to buy and use within a housing organisation really centres around the staff groups using them. Providing a housing officer with a large tablet in a sturdy case seems sensible but would you give plumbers, electricians and carpenters a smaller, more delicate and sophisticated phone?

Mobile working is still predominately used by maintenance teams who use rugged PDAs and they will require rugged smartphones. However manufacturers are having to play catch-up in this market with a rugged Android smartphone not due on the market until later in 2013. Housing officers in housing management teams are slowly adopting mobile working and they would need a tablet-style device due to the varied work they carry out in the field.

Enterprise mobile devices are more expensive than their consumer counterparts, but they are designed specifically to put up with the rigours of the industry, they usually come with extensive support and back-up and will, on the whole, do what you need them to do.

So when looking to embrace the benefits of mobilisation to the whole organisation, really consider which device is the right one for the right member of staff as it may prevent problems further down the line.

Stewart Davison
Product launch manager, Capita Software Services

Benchmarking IT services

Sir – Over the last couple of years, many heads of IT have expressed consternation about the applicability and relevance of benchmarking data to their organisations, in particular the HouseMark benchmarks. HouseMark has responded to some of these concerns by adding a further set of questions devised by a group of heads of IT.

Much of the problem relates to how the current data is used. In the case of HouseMark, IT costs are collected as part of the analysis of corporate overheads and should really be viewed in that context. An above-average spend on IT may result in below-average total operating costs. And if that does happen, there is a potential double whammy waiting to hit the unsuspecting head of IT. If investment in IT reduces operating costs and also total staffing levels, not only will IT appear 'expensive' in terms of cash expenditure but it will also appear additionally expensive when viewed as a percentage of the now reduced operating costs and also on a cost per user basis.

However you benchmark, it important that IT costs are viewed in the context of other organisational performance data. And probably the best way of ensuring that the value of IT expenditure is understood by the business is to ensure that the return on investment for any major projects is captured and publicised.

Claire Bayliss
Director of IT consulting, Montal Computer Services

Moving IT systems into the cloud

Sir – More and more clients are asking me, 'should I be putting my IT systems into the cloud, particularly when we all want to cut costs and make the best use of our shrinking IT budgets?'

It seems that housing providers are increasingly looking at cloud-based options, and while I would love to be able to reply with a simple 'yes', the use of IT in housing is not that simple so there are a number of things that you need to ask yourself.

First, are all of your applications suitable to run in a cloud environment? And how much will resilient communication links cost in the event that the initial ones fail? Going to a cloud model is likely to change the way you licence any software, so it is equally important to consider where you are in your current IT refresh cycle.

Additional considerations should include the value of the extras that you get as standard from cloud computing, such as business continuity and disaster recovery, and whether you have concerns about putting data into a remote cloud-based server.

Finally, and often one of the most important factors to think about is what would be the cost of your existing on-premise computing compared with a cloud-based solution over its lifetime.

Only once you have answered those questions should you consider sitting down with your IT partner to draw up a solution using cloud.

Peter Wilson
Senior technical architect, JMC IT

European housing network

Sir – I would like to examine the possibilities and benefits of establishing a European network for IT professionals in housing associations.

Europe has 19 countries where housing associations exist. As far as I know, only in the Netherlands and the UK do networks exist for professionals in IT and housing. The Netherlands' network comprises 160 members and in the UK only regional and/or size of organisation-related networks exist.

There is no international networking organisation aimed at the IT professionals in housing. Opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and best practices as well as joint projects are initiated on a personal level only. Perhaps it's time to set up such a networking organisation?

As the basis for some starting points for this idea, the Dutch Peer-2-Peer network was established in 2000 and now has 175 members representing almost two million units. The network has been successful and includes elements such as meetings, conference publications, study tours to other European countries and an annual total cost of ownership survey.

The members of the Dutch network and the participants in the TCO study are very interested in expanding their activities and contacts across borders. The network's format could easily be copied and translated for use in other countries and (once implemented) further modified to fit the local situation. This could help to join up related initiatives in different countries, leading to benefits for all relatively quickly and with limited financial and organisational input.

As soon as networks are in operation in various countries, the formation of a 'network-of-networks' could be the next step. Also the sharing and comparing of data and trends from the TCO survey could provide many countries with valuable data and lessons learnt.

Henk Korevaar
Founder, F-fectis (Netherlands)

Keeping the lights on is not enough

Sir – Around 18 months ago, the ALMO I work for was placed under review by its parent council. This followed a number of similar reviews across the country. Some had already been taken back into the council, some had remained in place.

The announcement sent ripples throughout the organisation. Forward momentum was replaced with introspection and projects faltered due to the elephant in the room; 'will we still exist next year?'

This prevailing philosophy could be described as 'concentrate on the day job' but how does this approach affect a service like ICT?

I had previously restructured my department and had resolved multiple issues that had led to reactive responses. I now had a proactive service with a wealth of skills, capability and enthusiasm and suddenly my approach was 'just keep the lights on'.

Rather than going along with this approach, my team and I sought to show the business what could be done, what efficiencies could be made and what services really could look like for customers internally and externally.

We began work to highlight the value of ICT to the business, with measures such as a data quality programme and a refresh of the corporate website. One of the key pieces of work was a forward-looking ICT programme to act as an internal sales pitch and as a brochure of what could be done using the systems and resources we already had. It included simple but effective measures such as channel shift, increased use of workflow, universal contact logging, document management; almost all were options that could be implemented without capital costs using existing capabilities. It served as a clear statement of what ICT could contribute to enable and develop the business.

At a time of financial uncertainty and increased scrutiny, ICT services need to be vocal and show their value to the businesses they support. Not only do they provide a vital function but they can also be pivotal in developing the efficiencies and cost savings being demanded by customers as well as national and local government.

Mark Birch
Strategic ICT manager, Gateshead Housing Company

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A common IT purpose

Sir – I have had the pleasure of attending several of Housing Technology's events in the UK, as well as receiving guests here in Holland. This has led to many interesting discussions. What has surprised me each time is the response to our CORA (Corporation Referential Architecture) standard and the way Dutch housing providers have managed to put aside their differences in order to achieve a common purpose.

Why is this concept so foreign in the UK? Do all housing associations not have the same purpose and do they not all require and produce the same information?

What are the obstacles that prevent a unified way of working in the UK housing industry?

I believe the answer should be none. Speaking the same language within the same sector has given us many benefits in Holland. We are now able to report in a unified way with results that are easily compared. I still believe the biggest gain is an industry-standard architecture that suppliers have to comply with, leading to improved customer/supplier relationships.

I am very interested in hearing other readers' thoughts on this matter.

Micky Kieboom
Ymere Housing, The Netherlandsh

Will universal credit drive mobility?

Sir – It is always encouraging to see the level of coverage that mobile systems account for in Housing Technology. It certainly helps readers to keep abreast of a rapidly changing technology landscape.

As a supplier of mobile technology to the housing sector, 1st Touch is also keen to take account of those trends that help our customers most. Recently, for example, there has been the rapid spread of mobile away from being solely a solution for managing responsive repairs. Now the technology is also used to support areas such as utilities, inspections and surveying, and care and support. We have also factored into our development the growing range of platforms being used for these applications.

However, the most significant change is yet to come. The imminent introduction of universal credit will now be a significant driver of the sales and supply of mobile technology. As housing benefits will now be paid to recipients as part of their universal credit and not direct to housing organisations, there's an urgent need to communicate with tenants to ensure that new payment arrangements are in place. In many cases, housing officers will need to make contact with their tenants to guide them through the new process. This is best done in person, while visiting the tenant's home and by confirming these arrangements through the housing officer's PDA.

Housing officers should have up-to-date information about the tenancy on their PDA when they visit. They will then be able to set up payment details and where appropriate, take the first payment or even settle outstanding arrears while there.

Thus, while the demands placed on social housing by the introduction of universal credit are potentially considerable, we feel that mobile technology will play a significant role in securing the changeover for housing organisations. The chances are that it will also play a role in building even stronger tenant relationships.

Cherry Rance
Marketing director, 1st Touch

Dumb and dumber

Sir – Technology is always on the move. I remember running the IT function for a CEO who made it a badge of honour to leave untouched the PC we had given him. Another 20 years on and I don't know of a self-respecting CEO who doesn't use IT as a fundamental part of the job and most of us love the latest bling gadget to help us do it even better.

Our tenants have embraced this technology revolution too and find new ways of talking to us. Faster services, of a better quality are what they are asking for. And through social media, we are increasingly expected to turn one-to-one dialogues into community-wide conversations.

But there's a neglected area. When I was taught housing management, the saying was that the tenant will talk to you too much and the home they live in won't talk at all, so you have to use your eyes whenever you visit. Our properties are still pretty dumb today, but maybe they are about to get the power of speech.

I don't begin to understand how they work, but now you can get sensors to measure just about anything and they can wirelessly transmit the data they capture to you as well. Leaks can be detected long before they can be seen, movement measured long before structural integrity is compromised, and blockages detected before your nose tells you there's a problem. They can even detect 'unusual forces' (i.e. tenant damage!) on door hinges or drawer runners.

My point? Our customers are getting smarter all the time. Unless our technology keeps up with our customers, our organisations will end up, like our houses now, dumb. And that doesn't feel like a good place to be.

Matthew Gardiner
Chief executive, Trafford Housing Trust

Bringing your own

Sir – There were some fascinating examples of mobile working in last month's issue of Housing Technology, and indeed our own research has found that as many as 68 per cent of housing providers have either implemented or planned mobile working projects for their employees.

It's fantastic to see that housing providers are embracing these projects and staff will undoubtedly benefit from the flexibility that mobile working allows, while the housing providers themselves should see significant cost and efficiency benefits. What is yet to be seen is how the hot topic of bring-your-own-device (BYOD) schemes will fit into this equation.

By allowing employees to use their own smartphones or tablets at work, cash-strapped housing providers don't need to provide expensive hardware for all staff; this is great news for the finance department but it has the potential to cause headaches for the IT team. If BYOD initiatives are to work in organisations that handle sensitive data, there needs to be a clear separation between the personal and professional uses of each device. There must also be a way to wipe all or part of the device's memory if it is stolen or lost.

As mobile working becomes more popular, the debate around BYOD is likely to intensify, particularly given the straitened financial times we live in. What is vital is that IT teams engage with the ever-evolving technology that can help tackle the issues with BYOD. Concepts such as containerisation, wrap-around apps and mobile device management platforms mean that there's the potential to implement BYOD schemes in a strategic, cost effective and secure way. This will allow IT departments to be seen as actively offering a solution, rather than being seen as the department that points out problems, a brush that many IT departments are often unfairly tarred with.

Declan Grogan
Managing director, NDL

What have you done for me lately?

Sir – One of the biggest problems I face in the workplace is a lack of understanding on what technology can achieve. This happens on a number of levels, with some people actively enjoying repetitive tasks (I know, it makes no sense to me either) and never making my team aware of the opportunity to improve tasks, to other people asking for automation or new systems without ever fully understanding the processes they are trying to replace.

Technology seems omnipresent in our lives now; smartphones, iPads, laptops, games consoles, the list goes on. But the important thing to understand about these devices is that they require no ability for systems thinking. As technologists we understand this, but to some people it is all too easy to equate being able to book a holiday online with 'understanding computers'.

Is there a way to overcome these barriers to understanding? I find adopting the middle ground works for me. I'm happy to show the business new technologies and systems and I'm happy to listen to what individuals would like to achieve from the technology. It's an iterative approach and it does require some patience but the results can be very successful with the business happy to 'own' these resulting solutions.

End users, eh? Where would we be without them?

Neil Jones
Head of IS, Newport City Homes

Seen it all before?

Sir – Those who have been in housing IT for long enough are probably experiencing a sense of déjà vu as we hear some commentators calling time on integrated housing systems. The 1990s was characterised by RSLs choosing packaged solutions to replace bespoke systems that had become unmanageable, couldn't be developed or supported; hardly surprising given that they were not software developers by trade and didn't have the resources to develop and maintain such complex systems. Packaged solutions offered a release from the endless burden of trying to keep the IT system going.

The downside to packaged solutions has been that they don't exactly meet customers' expectations out of the box because they were designed to meet the needs of differing organisations with varying requirements. Also as vendors provided ever more modules, so they became less inclined to integrate with products from other suppliers.

Not all vendors behave this way, and for our part we have always offered the choice of integrated modules, partners or integration as demanded by the business context, all platform-neutral and based on open standards. Furthermore if we can't provide a feature, our customer can create it using the same tools our developers use.

The same cannot be said of some products lauded as 'new technology', and as a technologist it makes me cringe when people describe the notably proprietary Microsoft as a 'standard'. Taking the long view, how many organisations that have ended up locked into Microsoft's ecosystem will regret their choices when the licence hikes start to bite?

The true benefit of an IHMS is not fewer technologies, it's avoiding duplication and disconnection of data and process, which will be familiar to anyone who has witnessed suppliers arguing over a failed interface or wondered why their outsourced maintenance contractor reports 99 per cent satisfaction despite obvious problems with delivery.

Organisations demand high quality solutions and our challenge is to sell our products on their own merits, not because of lock-in. The suggestion that critical business systems should be reinvented in Microsoft SharePoint or Dynamics might generate lucrative work for consultants but it is dangerously misleading and misses the point – it's not the technology that counts, it's your supplier's attitude.

Aidan Dunphy
Product manager, Orchard Information Systems

The true measure of success (or failure)

Sir – So you've hit upon the perfect systems-based solution to your latest major problem, or perhaps more likely, you were sold it by that very pushy salesperson at the last conference. You have convinced your finance director, secured the budget, written the business case and won over the board. What could possibly go wrong?

In my experience you will learn more in 10 minutes from the frazzled manager of a failed project than spending days visiting host sites recommended by the supplier. Having pored over many 'lessons learned' documents, the two most common reasons for project failures remain poor project execution and failure to change the pervading culture. And yet how many of us end up blaming the fit and/or functionality of the product?

How often do these two issues receive top billing in the business case? Sure, you may find some reference to them buried at the bottom of the risk map but if they are to be fully evaluated and resourced, they need to be pushed right to the top of the list of requirements.

Most IT solutions will deliver operational benefits; the suppliers wouldn't stay in business long if they didn't. But a solution is only a solution if it is embraced wholeheartedly and utilised to the maximum. To achieve this you need an experienced and doggedly-determined project manager, a fully-resourced and passionate project team and an innovative training and engagement programme that penetrates to the heart of the organisation.

Skimp on this and you're setting yourself up to fail from the outset. And I wouldn't want to be the one who has to explain to the finance director why that budget has doubled as a result, but then again, I would say that, wouldn't I?

Selina Olah
Finance director, Orbit Group

Cut out the hype

Sir – Over the past year, we have started to be told how important 'big data' is, prior to that it was BYOD, and before that it was cloud computing. Clearly, the ability of vendors to think up new terms for existing problems follows Moore's Law, with the rate doubling every 18 months.

This morning I was wondering if the three things above will morph into 'bring your own big cloud'. Could I then spin this in such a way that I become an industry expert, a leading visionary, and charge companies a fortune for advising them on the startlingly obvious?

On a serious note, it would be great to see some real innovation within the sector. Vendors that first talk about delivering outcomes, the supporting solutions behind it, and in jargon-free, plain English. Who knows – perhaps KISS will be the next big thing in IT?

Martin Carpenter
Director of IT, Peabody

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Worry about the data, not the device

Sir – Has the iPad changed the world of mobile working or has it just helped us change our minds?

As an IT manager who for many years saw Apple products as annoying things beloved by graphic designers, it took me a little while to come round to the iPad. But as a peripatetic consultant I wonder how I managed without it and go for days now without turning the laptop on.

For some time, the web and 3G networks promised the 'anything-anywhere' world but for the mobile worker there were a couple of issues to contend with. Boot time and battery life are key factors; the first must be very short and the second long. The iPad was the first device with a decent screen to deliver this which made it a game changer.

Technology must make life easier if it is to be of value and as IT professionals we must be prepared to follow what works and not get precious about it. Security and other concerns must be addressed but not used as an excuse to hang onto control and personal views about providers. We need to shift to securing the data rather the device in the new world and embrace the new solutions that enable this.

As John Maynard Keynes famously said, "When the facts change, I change my mind; what you do, sir?"

John Paul
Consultant IT director and executive coach

A cloudy outlook?

Sir – I've never taken much notice of the weather forecast; it's invariably wrong. The weather just happens, just creeps up on us and we put up with it because we have no choice. The same seems to apply to cloud computing. Over the past few years we have been bombarded with messages espousing the benefits of the cloud, how it's going to reduce our TCO and ultimately change our lives and the lives of our tenants.

Oddly enough, the cloud is already here. It caught us unawares while we were ambling along. Spotify has over 21 million active users, LinkedIn has 175 million users, Facebook claims to have almost 1 billion users and Microsoft has shifted five million Office 365 seats within three months… all products and services in the cloud.

What I find mildly depressing is that the majority of suppliers who are promoting the benefits of the cloud don't really get it. Yes, they talk about real-time access to data from wherever you are, sharing information, contingency around offsite storage, live chat and webinars.

I understand all that, but what we really need to do is encourage the big housing software suppliers to move their lumbering applications into the cloud and to provide flexible, modular interfaces for apps, opening the way for shared services and full integration with existing best-of-breed cloud solutions such as Microsoft Dynamics, Google Docs, SalesForce.com, Office 365, Facebook and other social media applications.

Then we will all celebrate how cloudy it really is.

Jonathan Creaser
Head of ICT, Richmond Housing Partnership

The impact of component accounting

Sir – With the passing of the SORP deadline earlier this year, housing providers up and down the country faced the daunting task of implementing a component accounting model that would adhere to the guidelines. With most providers' asset registers increasing tenfold, it is surprising to note that 74 per cent of organisations have not yet opted to implement a specialist solution.

While there is no simple 'all-in-one' solution, many housing providers addressed the changes with either a spreadsheet system, which won't provide a stable platform for ongoing compliance, or an incumbent housing asset management system. Component accounting requires a level of detail that is less granular than a housing asset management system can typically provide and yet too detailed for a general finance ledger. How an organisation manages its assets has multiple effects on its finances and its ability to adhere to government legislation. By moving away from a cumbersome spreadsheet system and towards an accurate and robust asset register that shows the location, value and condition of assets, businesses can ensure that they achieve compliance with SORP regulations.

There is no doubting the temptation to use spreadsheets and although they are adequate for collecting basic data, there are several good reasons for switching to a specialist component accounting system designed to cope with these intricacies. Too many spreadsheets contain errors, which is to be expected with information entered by hand. Whether it is the background asset data or the formula itself, there's little doubt that depreciation calculations, when based on a spreadsheet, are likely to be inaccurate – potentially affecting the balance sheet. By using a component accounting system, there are also major time savings from processing batch asset events such as asset acquisitions, disposals and replacements, to keep the asset register in line with the typical asset management maintenance plans.

Karen Conneely
Group commercial manager, Real Asset Management

Universal credit – immense and problematic

Sir – It was with great trepidation that I read the article 'Welfare Reform – Taking credit where it's due' in September's edition of Housing Technology. Having worked in the housing sector for ten years, these reforms represent one of the most wide-reaching and most problematic changes for social landlords that I have seen.

I understand the government's desire to ensure people from all social backgrounds are given the opportunity to govern their own finances but with approximately 62 per cent of households in the social housing sector receiving some form of housing benefit and 29 per cent of households being deemed 'economically inactive', the implications for housing providers are immense.

This is not just measurable in terms of the logistics of how and when rent payments will be made but also the increased pressure that some of our residents will be under. As they undertake new responsibilities for their own finances, many will require extra support from both their housing provider and other agencies and this must not be forgotten when IT strategy is being developed.

There has been much debate regarding the software and IT staff required for such radical changes but those on the frontline of housing and customer service will also have a demanding period ahead as they get to grips with not only the legislative changes but also the increased support that will inevitably be needed.

As an IT systems analyst and a former customer service advisor, I am looking forward to producing innovative and workable solutions to help manage the changes brought by universal credit.

I believe that by ensuring there is a balance between deliverable systems which help to limit arrears and practical solutions that do not overwhelm our residents, we will succeed in these challenging times ahead.

Judith Comber
Information systems analyst, Radian Group

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• **AAREON** - THE CHANGING ROLE OF IT • **ACCENT GROUP** - MODERNISING A COMPLETE ICT INFRASTRUCTURE • **ADACTUS HOUSING** - NEW WAYS OF WORKING & INTERNAL STAFF MANAGEMENT • **AFFINITY SUTTON** - MOBILE WORKING IN CARETAKING, GROUNDS MAINTENANCE AND BULK REFUSE COLLECTIONS • **ALLIANCE HOMES** - ASSET MANAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE REVIEW • **ASHTON PIONEER HOMES** - SOCIAL MEDIA, CUSTOMER SERVICE AND TENANT ENGAGEMENT • **BT** - TOPIC TO BE CONFIRMED • **CIRCLE** - FROM REACTIVE SUPPORT TO PROACTIVE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT • **CITY WEST HOUSING TRUST** - DELIVERING VALUE FOR MONEY THROUGH COST REDUCTIONS AND NEW TENANT SERVICES • **CITYWEST HOMES** - DIGITAL INCLUSION DELIVERED, WHAT'S NEXT? • **CONVERGEONE** - TOPIC TO BE CONFIRMED • **EQUANET** - TOPIC TO BE CONFIRMED • **FIRST WESSEX** - VALUE FOR MONEY, PROCUREMENT, E-TENDERING AND REGULATORY COMPLIANCE • **GALLIONS HOUSING** - DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF SHAREPOINT IN SOCIAL HOUSING • **GENTOO GROUP** - MOBILE WORKING IN NEIGHBOURHOODS AND CUSTOMER PREMISES • **HAVEBURY HOUSING** - IN-HOUSE PORTAL DEVELOPMENT FOR REPAIRS OPERATIVES USING HTML5, CSS AND JAVASCRIPT • **HAVEN REFUGE** - WEATHERING A STORM: BIG SYSTEMS FOR A SMALL HOUSING PROVIDER • **HYDE HOUSING** - HOW TO IMPLEMENT IT STRATEGY INTO AN ORGANISATION • **ISOS HOUSING** - VIRTUALISATION AND MOBILE WORKING • **JMC IT** - IT AS AN ENABLER FOR CHANGE WITHIN HOUSING • **MET** - TOPIC TO BE CONFIRMED • **NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE HOMES** - WELFARE REFORM, DIGITAL INCLUSION AND NEW COMMERCIAL BROADBAND SERVICES • **ORBIT GROUP** - SOCIAL BUSINESS – THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AS AN ENABLER OF BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION • **PEABODY** - THE ROLE OF SOCIAL HOUSING IN BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE • **RIVERSIDE GROUP** - BUSINESS INFORMATION REPORTING FOR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT • **SOLIHULL COMMUNITY HOUSING** - GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT ONLINE REPAIRS • **SOVEREIGN BUSINESS INTEGRATION GROUP** - TOPIC TO BE CONFIRMED • **SOVEREIGN HOUSING** - BALANCING IN-HOUSE AND EXTERNAL SOLUTIONS TO TRANSFORM IT SERVICES AND DELIVER A FIVE-YEAR BUSINESS STRATEGY • **THAMES VALLEY HOUSING** - FISHING WHERE THE FISHES ARE: ONLINE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT • **THRIVE HOMES** - MOVING FROM 'KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON' IT TO AN OUTSOURCED MODEL FOR CONTINUOUS BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT • **TOGETHER HOUSING GROUP** - DOING IT TOGETHER: DELIVERING BUSINESS EFFICIENCIES WITH A NEW HMS • **TRAFFORD HOUSING TRUST** - TRANSFORMING INTERNAL & EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA • **VIRIDIAN HOUSING** - TECHNOLOGY-LED CHANGE AND ADAPTING THE ROLE OF IT • **WEST KENT HOUSING** - WELFARE REFORM, UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND DIGITAL INCLUSION • **WORCESTER COMMUNITY HOUSING** - BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS: EXPANDING, ENHANCING AND REWARDING CUSTOMER PARTICIPATION • **WULVERN HOUSING** - UNIVERSAL CREDIT, DIGITAL INCLUSION AND TENANT PROFILING • **YMERE HOUSING & F-FECTIS** - THE NEW WAY OF WORKING

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

WORLD CUP WINNER AND TEAM GB'S DIRECTOR OF SPORT, SIR CLIVE WOODWARD CONFIRMED AS KEYNOTE SPEAKER AT HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2013.

JOHN BIRD, FOUNDER OF THE BIG ISSUE, TO SPEAK AT THE PRE-EVENT EVENING DRINKS RECEPTION ON WEDNESDAY 20 FEBRUARY.

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