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no surprise to me that they are return
numbers.

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Editor's Notes

Busy times

It's been a rather busy time over the Christmas and New Year holidays, with the production of this issue coinciding with the final stages of our 'Spectrum 2013: Review of IT Suppliers' survey (with an incredible 220+ respondents, see page 28), alongside confirming the final line-up of speakers, sponsors and exhibitors for next month's Housing Technology 2013 conference in Oxford (see page 20).

Both the survey/report and the conference indicate that the housing sector is in good health. In the case of the report, our initial analysis (admittedly in outline form only) suggests that most IT suppliers are doing a good job of meeting housing providers' requirements, although we will know more once we start the in-depth analysis, application area by application area.

At the same time, the 2013 conference has an eclectic range of speakers and presentations, as well as two fantastic keynote presentations, and sponsors and exhibitors covering the full range of application and infrastructure areas.

We've said it before, but we'll say it again; Housing Technology 2013 is only a one-day event but it covers an incredible breadth and depth of topics. Find out more on page 20.

Nimble and secure

What's around the corner? As we've reported before, rent arrears will become a business-critical area for every housing provider with the introduction of universal credit. We expect to see new IT suppliers addressing the housing sector, particularly as local and central government departments restrain their IT budgets, and therefore look at social housing as a new market. At the same time, mergers and acquisitions among housing providers will increase as the bigger providers try to take advantage of economies of scale. Ageing tenant populations will increase the demand for telehealth and telecare while the 'generation Y' of tenants will expect more mobile and joined-up services. All of these point to more nimble and secure (pace the BYOD trend) infrastructures, with IT departments therefore having a greater say in operations.

Web 2.0

We planned this several years ago but we are finally in the middle of a project to catalogue over 2,000 stories from the past 30+ issues of the magazine and our various reports, all of which will be searchable by topic, housing provider, IT supplier, magazine issue and other keywords. We hope this will be an invaluable resource for both housing providers and IT suppliers.

For the first time, anyone involved in the UK housing sector will be able to access an unparalleled information resource spanning the last six years, making it easier for housing providers to research options for new implementations, and for IT suppliers to become better informed about customers and prospects. If the project goes to plan, the new site should be live in early March.

FUTURE EVENTS

SECTIONS

RTI and auto-enrolment system from MidlandHR

To help housing providers meet two of the largest and most complex legislative changes in recent years, MidlandHR has launched a real-time information (RTI) and auto-enrolment (AE) solution. MidlandHR customers went live on HMRC's RTI pilot project in 2012, involving around 40,000 employees and pensioners across 20 payrolls.

The RTI and Pensions Reform initiatives are part of the government's plan to reduce the imbalance between government income and expenditure. RTI is intended to speed up and improve the accuracy of PAYE receipts and AE to boost the funding of pensions. MidlandHR reported that the development of the RTI- and AE-ready software was one of the biggest, most complex and labour-intensive software projects the company had ever undertaken.

The new solution has been named 10.7.05 and is the latest version of iTrent, MidlandHR's integrated system for HR, payroll, talent management and workforce planning.

Declan McGrath, managing director, MidlandHR, said, "We've invested considerable resources in enhancing iTrent to meet the new legislative changes, reducing administrative time and cost and minimising set up and configuration costs. We're really pleased to offer our customers an approved solution to deal with the increased employer duties that they will have in 2013.

"Over the last two years we have taken part in various consultations with HMRC and the DWP and we were instrumental in shaping and influencing legislative change. This early engagement gave us a thorough understanding of the likely business impact of the new legislation and allowed MidlandHR to engage with and represent the customer community to ensure any legislative changes were practical and realistic."

MidlandHR said that 10.7.05 minimises the risk and impact of RTI with the in-built HMRC RTI schema, for example, checking employers' RTI submissions before they are sent to HMRC. This reduces the delay and costs associated with submitting invalid or incorrect information.

The new version of iTrent also addresses the complexities of the upcoming Pensions Reform legislation, with users able to access and view all the relevant information they need on summary screens. With the flexibility to accommodate different approaches to the assessment and enrolment process, iTrent users can choose the most appropriate route, either undertaking the workforce assessment and auto-enrolment separately or as one process.

Better HR at the Royal Borough of Greenwich with MidlandHR

The Royal Borough of Greenwich is set to use MidlandHR's iTrent software for talent management, workforce planning, human resources and payroll. Greenwich has chosen a fully-hosted system and will be implementing a range of iTrent modules covering core HR, payroll, self-service, online recruitment and electronic payslips to support its 15,000 staff.

Declan McGrath from MidlandHR said, "By using our private cloud, Greenwich will have a risk-free, cost-effective, outsourced solution which combines our iTrent software with protection against the infrastructure issues that can affect on-premise IT services and information availability."

The Royal Borough of Greenwich is the eleventh council in London to use MidlandHR.

96 per cent of landlords worried about universal credit

The latest quarterly survey from the National Landlords Association has found that 96 per cent of the 500 landlords surveyed were concerned about the introduction of universal credit. Other related concerns included arrears avoidance (64 per cent) and minimising voids (56 per cent).

While it should be noted that the NLA represents the private residential sector, the very high level of concern about universal credit is likely to also apply to the social housing sector.

David Salusbury, chairman, National Landlords Association, said, "Although we support the principle of encouraging people to take responsibility for their finances, landlords have to deal with the problems when this doesn't happen in practice.

"Direct payment of housing benefit to landlords has provided a reassurance which many people fear may now be removed. I hope that landlords, tenants and local authorities can work together to ensure the smooth transition from the local housing allowance to universal credit. If tenants fail to meet their rental commitments, we are likely to see landlords withdrawing from the local housing allowance market."

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- BPHA **14**
- Cunninghame Housing Association **08**
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London boroughs cut housing fraud with Experian

Experian has helped the London boroughs of Hammersmith & Fulham and Hillingdon to save over £1 million from the fraudulent sub-letting of their properties, with the former reporting savings of almost £3,000 per day since the implementation of the Experian fraud detection techniques.

Although the full extent of housing fraud in the UK is unknown, extrapolation of analysis by Experian of 30 housing providers managing a total of 250,000 properties suggests that at least 160,000 social housing properties are unlawfully sub-let across the UK, representing a loss of rental income of over £5 billion each year.

Hammersmith & Fulham on target to save £1 million

Hammersmith & Fulham is using Experian's fraud detection and data-matching techniques to analyse the tenancy records of its 12,000 properties. This analysis, combined with the local knowledge of the council's housing staff, led to the targeting of around 300 high-risk properties and has already saved almost £700,000, with

an anticipated total saving of £1 million by early this year.

In many cases, keys were very quickly surrendered following an email, phone call or visit from the council's housing officers while legal action is being taken against some offenders.

Andrew Johnson, cabinet member for Housing, London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, said, "These results prove our zero tolerance towards fraud is working. Every fraudster profiting from the most vulnerable members of society by unlawfully subletting social homes should know they now run a very high risk of being caught."

Hammersmith & Fulham now expects to cut fraud even further after implementing more

stringent identity checks on applicants. The council has joined forces with Experian to develop a UK-wide data-sharing service available to all housing providers.

Hillingdon recoups £500,000

London Borough of Hillingdon is using the same Experian services and has already recovered around 40 properties, equating to around £500,000 in annual revenues.

Philip Corthorne, cabinet member for social care, health and housing, London Borough of Hillingdon, said, "People who illegally sub-let local authority tenancies are denying those residents in real need of a home. In Hillingdon this is something we will not tolerate and anyone caught faces losing their property for good."

ENEHL swaps paper for e-purchasing

East North East Homes Leeds (ENEHL) has developed a new subcontractor work allocation payments system (Swaps) in conjunction with Leeds City Council and Barclaycard. The new system makes it easier for the housing provider to allocate jobs to its roster of subcontractors and speed up the necessary payment processes.

Swaps comprises two components. The first holds data on all ENEHL's subcontractors so that the right jobs are allocated transparently to the correct subcontractors, purely based on price and past performance. The second is the use of just one purchase card (p-card) for all transactions so that ENEHL not only has complete visibility of its spending on subcontractors, but also can reduce its payment processes from 28 days to just four days. ENEHL reported that it has made a 20 per cent saving on void works within six weeks of the p-card's introduction.

Adam Standerline, assistant quantity surveyor, East North East Homes Leeds, said, "Our old system involved a long paper trail that resulted in orders going astray and people not

being paid on time. The new system provides clear benefits such as smarter working, less paper and more efficient processing. What's more, we remain in complete control of the work and payment process so that we get the best value for money."

Tony Butler, director of technical services, said, "Purchasing work through our subcontractors, using the p-card lowers the transaction cost of each purchase and reduces the number of paper invoices. And with only one p-card, we have a complete picture of who is spending what, where and when, and our subcontractors have the peace of mind of knowing that they will be paid within just four days for the work they've done."

Moody's reports on housing providers' risk

While not strictly technology-related, a recent report from Moody's Investor Services has highlighted the 'downside risks' facing many housing providers during 2013 and beyond. The report, titled 'English Housing Associations: Lingering Downside Risk Despite Positive 2012 Results', primarily considers the impact of universal credit and the likely increased risk that it will add in terms of rent collections and arrears as part of housing providers total income.

Moody's rated the risk of loss of income as "manageable" but added that "in a more adverse scenario, structural loss of income from weak rent collection could exert downward pressure on ratings".

The report went on to highlight how many housing providers have increased "their sales and, more broadly, non-core commercial activities to accommodate a reduction in capital grants from the UK government", and pointed out that these

revenue streams are less stable than traditional rental incomes and fluctuate more with the wider economy.

The report also said housing providers' exposure to [stock] market volatility from floating-rate debt and hedging positions may strain their cash flows in future, depending on the robustness of their business plans, and that sudden increases in interest rates beyond levels assumed in their business plans would exert pressure on ratings.

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Competitive dialogue – Part three

John Paul, Technical Director, ConsultEast

This is the third in a series of articles covering the various stages of a live Competitive Dialogue procurement process, from its inception through to, we hope, contract signatures. The first article was published in the September 2012 issue of Housing Technology.

An important part of procurement projects based on competitive dialogue is the idea that the solution can evolve throughout the process and that has certainly happened with the procurement I have been doing for the past few months. It's easy to get so caught up in the procurement process that you lose sight of the big picture which is usually to help an organisation achieve its objectives.

Well, the big picture has certainly been very present in this one. The procurement had the original aim of replacing a number of existing applications and while a core set was definitely in scope, on the fringes there were decisions to be made about retaining or replacing others. As the detailed solution stage approached, it was clear that some of the proposals could not only replace everything that was potentially in scope but could go much further and deliver wider benefits.

Cloud developments

The difficulty here is that having set the scope at the outset of a 'traditional' OJEU procurement project, there is only limited room to expand it as you go through the dialogue process. At the other end of the spectrum, we had become aware of new market entrants offering cloud-based solutions aimed at specific areas. Things are moving fast in the area of cloud solutions and there are options available now that didn't exist when the procurement began. The big decision on the table was now about scope and some of the choices could not be accommodated within the scope of the OJEU notice so the only sensible option was to suspend the procurement to allow time for consideration.

At first this feels like a lot of wasted time, effort and money but there is another important side to it. There are many examples where projects have pushed on despite changes in the operating environment and many of these have had unhappy outcomes (see www.bpic.co.uk/articles/deadhorse.html for advice on pursuing projects beyond the point of usefulness). The other way of looking at this is that the dialogue process had built a consensus that the original scope was not what was needed. A new clarity had emerged and also new developments in the market place had been recognised.

Making the decision

Now you can say that this is all fine but if you keep changing you mind, you will never make a decision, but is that worse than making a decisive choice that proves less than ideal? Okay, the concept of 'ideal' may be a bit of a Holy Grail in information systems but let's look at the practical impacts.

The primary aim of replacing an expensive and difficult to support legacy system could now be addressed using a cloud-based option that had only recently become available. The second aim of reducing the number of applications in use had been shown to be under-ambitious as the scope had been too tight.

The game had changed and was now in fact two requirements: one short term and of limited scope; and the other much bigger. The first goal of replacing an old system and reducing costs could now be achieved with much lower investment than originally expected and it had been accepted that the longer-term goal needed much more thought, engagement and assessment. So we have short-term savings on investment and running costs firmly in the sights and a strategic direction under active consideration – not a bad outcome in my book.

Instead of proving that the OJEU competitive dialogue process is a lengthy and expensive waste of time, I think it has demonstrated that it takes time to discover what is really needed. The downside is that the suppliers involved have also spent time and money taking part in the process and these costs must be recouped through charges to their customers.

New market entrants

With that in mind, we have learnt that some new entrants have made a decision to market their products in a way that avoids the traditional procurement approaches.

One way they do this is to keep their costs down by not chasing tenders that they can only ever win a small proportion of and pass those savings on in lower charges. To avoid OJEU they must keep their charges below certain thresholds and this also means a limit to customisation. It's more of a utility computing model, supplying service rather than product, and it's gaining ground fast.

The next few years will hold some big challenges for the traditional suppliers and I believe we will see a new range of lower cost solutions emerge. The world of information systems is being driven by consumerisation and many of the old certainties are changing.

The world of housing is also changing; the introduction of universal credit combined with likely rent increases will mean that the difference between the social housing and private rented sectors will shrink. Providers and developers of cloud-based solutions are producing lower cost, standardised services and I believe they will very soon be a real alternative to more traditional solutions.

John Paul is the technical director for ConsultEast.

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WCH rewards tenants with Clearview

Worcester Community Housing has developed its own customer involvement software, known internally as 'Rewards', to incentivise its tenants to get involved in surveys and help improve housing services. The software has since been enhanced further by Clearview Systems and is available as a commercial product. WCH will be discussing 'Rewards' at the Housing Technology 2013 conference next month.

Di Smith, head of customer services and involvement, Worcester Community Housing, said, "Administering involvement activity had become a big headache. We had spreadsheets that didn't join up with each other so data was often incorrect and out of date.

"It became difficult to monitor our successes and identify where we needed to improve because getting accurate figures was labour-intensive and time-consuming. We were in danger of running involvement activities that were financially wasteful, with few recordable results."

WCH initially looked at the market for a single system that could administer, incentivise, report and survey tenant involvement activities but when it was unable to find a suitable off-the-shelf system, it decided to develop its own.

The web-based Clearview Customer Engagement suite originally developed by the WCH team enables end-users to create and administer involvement activities and groups, incentivise involvement in surveys and other activities (with the incentive points exchangeable for rewards), record costs and produce comprehensive reports.

Pete Adams, customer involvement advisor, Worcester Community Housing, said,

"The best part of the system is that it's been developed by customer involvers for customer involvers. It makes what we do smart, measurable and gives something back to our customers who give up their time to help improve local housing services. In 10 months we went from having only five per cent of our customers involved in our work to 15 per cent – Rewards definitely works.

"We plan to expand what we use the system for and integrate it into all areas of customer interaction, such as using Rewards to incentivise people to go 'digital by default' and carry out tenancy transactions online. We want to use Rewards to encourage 'good tenant-like behaviour'; rewarding customers for allowing access to properties for repairs, making timely rent payments and keeping to agreements with estate managers."

Thames Valley and Cunninghame get web-based BI with Clearview

In related news, Thames Valley Housing Association and Cunninghame Housing Association have both announced that they will be using Clearview for web-based business intelligence and reporting across their various 'siloed' business applications.

Tim Grannell, head of policy and performance, Thames Valley Housing Association, said, "We have used the Clearview strategy, project and risk management systems for many years so a significant benefit for us will be the ability to have one product to visualise and provide insight from information across all of our systems."

Mark Hobart, managing director, Clearview Systems, said, "Our customers tell us that they want to cleanse, analyse and report across multiple data sources, use Google-style search to find information quickly

and intuitively, produce dashboards, map results and put the power of insight from data into the hands of their teams and in so doing reduce the burden of reporting on the ICT team.

"We also find that housing management and other system vendors have tended to offer their preferred reporting tool which has led to a silo-based approach to reporting with many different systems often being used. We deal with this by providing a single tool for reporting across all of the data repositories within the organisation, simply and easily."

Cunninghame consolidates reporting with Clearview

Ayrshire-based Cunninghame Housing Association is using Clearview's web-based business intelligence and reporting suite to consolidate data and reporting activities across a range of business, finance and HR systems, replacing a number of application-specific reporting tools.

Alison McColl, head of IT, Cunninghame Housing Association, said, "Our current reporting system, Hummingbird, only runs on our housing management system plus Open Accounts, Sage HR and Sage Payroll all have their own reporting tools – for each system that we use, there is another reporting tool!

"We have limited in-house capacity for report writing so the web-based Clearview system will let us retrieve data from all of our application databases and display it using powerful graphics to streamline and simplify our reporting processes. Ultimately, we will be using one business intelligence reporting system attached to all databases, accessed by as many end-users as we need."

Digital inclusion advice from Age UK

Age UK has published a guide to digital inclusion for organisations wanting to work with care homes. The guide is based on Age UK's 'Reach for IT' project and is accompanied by a 'My Home Life' magazine. Both publications are available now from Age UK's website (www.ageuk.org.uk).

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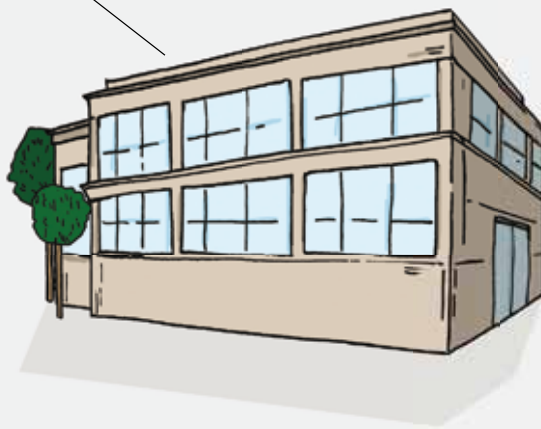
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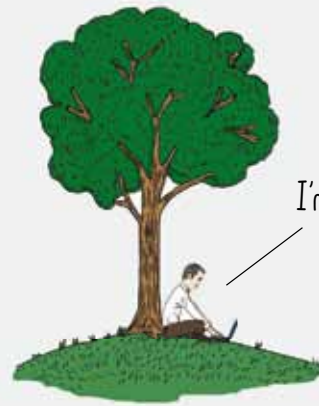
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Blackwood Homes unlocks Civica's potential

Blackwood Homes has reported that it is in the latter stages of a three-year project to unlock the full potential of its existing Civica housing management system. Beginning in 2010, the project has concentrated on minimising the use of standalone spreadsheets and databases and increasing the use of the HMS by staff in areas such as repairs, voids and arrears.

The project began with an external review of Blackwood Homes' systems and business processes which highlighted the use of multiple spreadsheets and Access databases being used across the organisation as work-arounds instead of using the main Civica housing management system.

It was apparent that the HMS was being very under-used as well as being used inefficiently with, for example, very little letter generation being carried out directly from the HMS. The review concluded that the Civica system was capable of providing a robust solution but some significant changes were needed.

The first phase of the project included some 'housekeeping' activities to ensure the system was running efficiently. This included data cleansing and an upgrade to the latest version of the Civica HMS. In terms of specific service areas, Blackwood Homes and Civica agreed that the greatest benefits would be achieved by reviewing the repairs, voids and arrears modules, including former

tenant arrears and tenant recharges. Jenny Deed, housing services team leader, Blackwood Homes, said, "The void summary report we asked for not only saves me time every week as I no longer need to type up a report from our weekly team meeting on current void status, but we can have accurate and up-to-date information to discuss at the meeting. Just this one report makes a big difference in my role of managing voids for the team."

The second phase then covered planned and cyclical repairs, rent and service charge modules and the introduction of a bespoke gas servicing system.

The main benefit to Blackwood Homes of having reviewed its use of the Civica HMS has been a reduction in the time its staff spend on administrative tasks that are no longer carried out using Microsoft Office and are now handled within the HMS.

Almost 40 arrears-related letters are now generated direct from the HMS, and all

arrears cases requiring particular scrutiny are now automatically highlighted to staff, saving one day per month per housing officer. After supplier statement functionality was added, the housing provider's three main contractors all now invoice against statements, reducing the number of invoices from an average of around 500 invoices per month for those contractors to around 30 per month. The repairs review has enabled all performance management reports to be generated direct from the solution, savings of two days per month for the senior property assistant.

Marie Livingstone, senior property assistant, Blackwood Homes, said, "It is much easier and quicker to complete tasks and we can extract information for all our reporting purposes. This has increased our tenant satisfaction as we have better processes in place therefore more time to concentrate on key customer service tasks."

Mobile working is now mainstream – NDL report

The 2012 Mobile Working Report published by software provider NDL shows that mobile working is now a mainstream technology for most housing providers and local authorities. Of the 150 IT executives who were interviewed for the report, 70 per cent said that they either had mobile working projects already underway or they were in the planning stages to do so.

Declan Grogan, managing director, NDL, said, "Housing providers are keen to capitalise on the efficiency and cost savings that mobile working offers. As housing providers typically have a narrower area of focus and fewer conflicting calls from competing departments than, say, local authorities, it might be expected that the decision-making process is more streamlined, particularly given that decisions are typically made on a purely commercial basis."

The majority of the projects cited had been implemented in connection with housing repairs, including stock ordering, scheduling and general repairs applications. The average size of mobile working projects has grown, with the

number of schemes involving 100-250 users doubling from eight per cent to 17 per cent since NDL's 2011 report.

Grogan said, "The trend towards larger mobile working projects shows that housing associations and local authorities are moving from pilots to full-scale roll-outs. It also indicates that IT staff understand the benefits of mobile working and illustrates their ambitious plans to implement large-scale projects.

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.

Aspire Housing gets tough with Spirit Data Capture & Motorola

Following the decision to replace its 'consumer grade' PDAs, Aspire Housing has signed a three-year contract with Spirit Data Capture for the provision of Motorola MC65 rugged PDAs as a managed service alongside MobiControl software for device management and helpdesk support.

Aspire's previous PDAs had insufficient battery life for a complete working day and weren't tough enough; if they were dropped, they tended to disintegrate.

Debbie Simpson, system development administrator, Aspire Housing, said, "Before moving to the Motorola devices and the support from Spirit, most of my working days were spent resolving issues or returning broken devices back to the manufacturer. On average, I would return at least one each week – the process was very frustrating and time-consuming. We needed an economical way of upgrading our hardware from consumer-level devices to a more professional and fully robust model that would give us some technical continuity and stability.

"We also wanted a fully-managed service for the new PDAs. This included a solution that would allow remote access to the devices for problem solving while the operative is still in the field, and remote upgrades of our mobile application. Basically, we didn't want to know if there was a problem – we just wanted a supplier that could sort out any issues for us."

Spirit supplied Aspire with Motorola enterprise digital assistant (EDA) devices, rated IP-64 for protection against solids and water ingress, running the Windows 6.5 Professional operating system. Spirit's managed service includes its MobiControl device management system alongside a continuous technology refreshment programme. The contract also includes a first-line helpdesk service and end-user training.

Simpson said, "The MobiControl software has enabled us to roll out software much more easily. Under the old system, I had to call in all 60 operatives, clear down their PDAs and reinstall the software via an SD card."

The new Motorola devices are now being used for logging jobs on Aspire's housing management system, scheduling and assigning them, and for receiving and completing works orders which are then sent back to the housing management system.

Simpson said, "I used to manage our mobile assets on a spreadsheet but trying to maintain it with the amount of swap-outs I had to deal with was very difficult. All asset management is now maintained and updated regularly by Spirit."

Spirit also maintains a buffer stock so that any exchange EDAs can be shipped immediately to Aspire, with new devices typically delivered by 10am the next day.

Wheatley launches Assign for real-time scheduling

Wheatley Associates has launched Assign, a browser-based appointment booking, work scheduling, operative tracking and mobile communications system for managing any size field workforce in real-time. Assign replaces the company's previous GRASP software suite.

The company said that Assign dynamically balances work allocations and takes account of changing events to maximise productivity and ensure the optimal use of costly resources, while also ensuring customer service commitments are met.

Assign's user interface and job booking wizard makes the initial job booking process easier, enabling customer service staff to book jobs directly on to the scheduler with visual prompts of optimal appointment options. Once jobs are booked, Assign's proprietary scheduling algorithm allocates work to maximise the efficiency and productivity of the workforce, using its detailed knowledge of all the available operatives, pre-planned work and existing customer service commitments.

Assign's mobile communications technology enables work schedules to be dispatched directly to workers' PDAs either one job at a time or as a sequenced list. By constantly monitoring feedback as jobs progress, Assign dynamically reschedules work and re-outputs jobs to operatives as needed.

Assign includes industry-standard interfaces so that it can be integrated with most housing applications, with Wheatley Associates managing the integration directly with third-party software vendors on behalf of its customers. Assign also features an optional profit and loss reporting module so that profitability analysis can be done by customer, invoice, month or job.

Jeremy Goulding, CEO, Wheatley Associates, said, "Assign puts the right skills in the right place at the right time, automatically creating hundreds of operatives' schedules, quickly determining the optimum workload distribution and minimising fleet management costs. Assign balances the complex issues of efficiency and customer satisfaction for any size of field workforce."

1st Touch's new appointments

1st Touch has recruited two new members of staff within its sales and marketing operations. Mim Claridge joins the company as its UK marketing executive, having worked previously at ergonomic and assistive technology company Keytools. Russell Holmes has been appointed as a senior account manager for enterprise opportunities, joining from Readsoft where he worked on Oracle-based document management services.

Cherry Rance, business development director, 1st Touch, said, "1st Touch continues to grow and these appointments reflect the considerable increase in demand for our mobile products across multiple platforms and formats."

2013
– A new era of work

Mark Summers, Head of Technology Sales, JMC IT

2013 will be a challenging time for housing providers as they face continuing funding cuts and the introduction of universal credit. Added to this is an increasingly 'tech-savvy' workforce wanting the flexibility to choose how, where and when they work. However, we see access to technology as a real opportunity for organisations to thrive, stand out from their peers and continue to meet tenants' needs by delivering more for less, despite the challenges that lie ahead.

2012 was a year of momentous events which put the UK centre stage and the British public felt compelled to attend. This presented an additional test for businesses, and housing providers were not alone in having to tackle issues of continuity of service at a time when many staff were out of the office or even struggling to get into work due to overburdened transport networks.

Viable alternative

Having previously toyed with the idea of flexible working, the events of last summer forced many companies to seriously consider this as a viable alternative to offering a skeletal service during the busy months. For some, this practice was merely a short-term option to see them through the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympic Games, but others saw the real advantages of greater mobility and flexibility in the workplace. It was a summer of success on both fronts, and for the housing sector in particular, flexible working proved to offer immeasurable benefits in the delivery of services. Now, with the additional challenges that lie ahead for the housing sector, flexible working may really present itself as a permanent solution to help organisations push ahead.

The drive for change

Rather than coming from the top down, the move for flexible and mobile working has arguably been driven by employees themselves; great news for housing providers wanting to introduce a new era of work and implement change. In 2012, many housing providers reported that their staff were using their own devices – tablets, mobiles and laptops – to access work applications, reflecting the wider 'bring your own device' (BYOD) trend.

Some 69 per cent of employees have admitted to working from their personal devices, thereby increasing the amount of time spent carrying out their jobs by seamlessly offering the ability to continue working while travelling, at home or on the move.

Genuine cost-savings

In reaction, housing providers have been quick to support the BYOD trend as more and more organisations have seen the added cost-savings it brings. We recently worked with one housing provider to help it downsize its head office to such an extent that it only had permanent desks for 40 per cent of its workforce; the other 60 per cent now hot-desk and mobile work. This approach can really set organisations apart from their peers and is a great way to prove that they believe in a more hands-on approach instead of expecting tenants to do the legwork when it comes to interacting with their housing provider.

Universal credit

Changes to the benefit system will mean that mobile working will become even more widespread in order to meet tenants' needs too. The exact ramifications of the introduction of universal credit obviously remain to be seen, but it is already evident that housing providers will be faced with additional challenges when it comes to operating smooth payment systems.

With talk of tenants being only able to make universal credit applications online, it is quite possible that they will want their housing providers to help guide them through this process. This is where mobile working will have a direct benefit to tenants. Some tenants may have never used the internet before while others simply don't have the means to get online. One way for housing providers to tackle this is to take the internet direct to their tenants. Certain organisations have already trialled this through the use of mobile devices such as tablets which housing officers can take with them when visiting tenants.

Next steps

In order to enable flexible and mobile working, which is being driven organically by employees themselves, by housing providers under pressure to cut costs as well as the future needs of tenants, housing providers must ensure that their IT systems are up to the task. A virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) may be the first step in creating a more mobile environment. VDI removes processes from PCs to a central location which means staff can access the same desktop from any location, on any device.

As well as being very convenient, VDI is also an efficient option for organisations keen to cut costs by, for example, vastly reducing the management overhead of their current PC estate and having a single virtual image to manage. By removing the processing element, VDI can speed up outdated computers and often makes old kit run like new, thus extending the lifespan of the devices and also helping many organisations with the impending end of life of Windows XP. The other benefit of VDI is that mobile devices can act as a portable interface for all on- and off-site activities, with the added advantage of offering rock-solid business continuity if staff can't make it into the office.

Credible solutions

The BYOD culture of 2013 is likely to accelerate the adoption of VDI as housing providers look for a more solid approach to delivering service to their tenants. It is likely that this will lead to organisations moving to a centralised virtual network infrastructure, meaning that staff can operate much more flexibly, safe in the knowledge that all data is being backed up securely off-site. But in order to achieve this, organisations must ensure their IT provider has a credible solution that prevents data leaks and monitors end-user behaviour, as well as protecting against outside threats.

A holistic approach

Mobile working is suited to any organisation, giving them the power to not only help staff negotiate changes in legislation but also giving them the ability to work flexibly and thus improve productivity. Not only does this approach boost the brand's standing in terms of clients and shareholders, it is also a real attraction for potential employees. The most talented jobseekers often stipulate exactly what type of working environment they are looking for, with many opting to join the most flexible workforce. Having constant access to full business systems and being able to decide how and when to work is a great attraction for today's generation of workers. The holistic, forward-thinking approach to a changing work environment may initially present a challenge for housing providers, but it is one they should fully embrace if they are to thrive in 2013.

Mark Summers is head of technology sales at JMC IT.

Connexion2 extends Family Mosaic deal with 900 lone worker devices

Family Mosaic has announced that it is extending its earlier contract with Connexion2 with the implementation of more than 900 Identicom devices for lone-worker protection as part of a SoloProtect package.

Family Mosaic's staff will continue to have the ability to discreetly raise an alarm if necessary when working alone in the community, such as with young people leaving care, former rough sleepers and people with brain injuries.

When an employee feels they are entering a hazardous situation, the Identicom devices allow users to activate an 'amber alert', leaving important location information. If they feel unsafe or if their safety is compromised, they can then discreetly raise a 'red alert' which is received by an approved alarm receiving centre (ARC), where a dedicated member of the lone worker team can listen to and assess the situation and escalate to a Police response if necessary. In the event of a verbal confrontation, the ARC can record the conversation, which can then be admissible in court if required.

Russ Bower, health and safety advisor, Family Mosaic, said, "We are delighted to have renewed our relationship with Connexion2. Having gone back to the market recently, we found that no other supplier could compete with SoloProtect on price, service or support."

All Connexion2's SoloProtect solutions are BS8484 approved, guaranteeing a Police escalation, one level above a 999 call, where appropriate. The solution includes Identicom devices, inclusive billing, 24/7 manned monitoring, SIM cards, mobile network usage, device training and monthly reporting.

Next-generation lone working devices

Connexion2 has also announced the recent development of its Identicom 8 Series which includes more features for the same cost as the earlier 7 Series devices.

As with earlier versions, the new Identicom devices are styled as an identity badge for discreet wear and use, and have been designed and manufactured entirely in the UK; being British-made ensures a tighter control is maintained on quality as well as allowing Connexion2 to react faster to market demands.

Connexion2 reported that the 8 Series devices include a number of unique features including configurable one- or two-way audio depending on risk profile, a 32-bit ARM processor platform for 'over the air' (OTA) software upgrades, and the latest Sirf IV GPS technology which delivers a faster time to first location fix.

The new devices also now include automatic 'man down' detection as standard to give employees working remotely or in difficult environments additional protection in case of a slip, fall or unexpected health problem.

IT Proz launches iAssist inventory software on tablets

IT Proz, a specialist digital agency focusing on the UK property sector, has launched its iAssist property inventory software on 'ruggedised' Motion tablet PCs in conjunction with Camtech Systems.

The combined software and hardware solution is intended to eliminate unprofitable off-site work, streamline the production of inventory reports and promote data consistency to increase turnover and productivity.

The effective monitoring of the condition of property assets and the inventories within them means that the data collated needs to be comprehensive and consistent across properties, typically combining pictures, videos and text. The information required can often range from very detailed data, such as kitchen inventories, to more general data in the case of the general appearance of the property.

For many housing providers, tablet PCs therefore offer a suitable platform to enable consistent, multi-media data collation, but IT Proz makes the case for using professional, enterprise-ready tablets.

Harry Tyldesley, project manager, IT Proz, said, "Consumer units just don't cut it for us. The main issues are battery life, screen size and the speed of the drives.

"Battery life is a pretty obvious requirement as the unit needs to be able to serve a full day, and the screen size is also important as a larger screen means less scrolling and faster data entry. Lastly, the speed of the drive means there are no moments of the application freezing, again frustrating productivity."

Based on improved rates of data collation and input, as well as removing the need for duplication of data entry in the back office, IT Proz estimates that the tablet-based deployment of iAssist halves the time associated with the production and distribution of inventory reports.

Benchmarking IT services

Housing Technology interviewed senior IT executives from BPHA, F-fectis, Montal, Northgate Public Services and Sovereign Business Integration Group to consider how housing providers can benchmark their IT services, what to benchmark, the merits of internal staff and external consultants, how often to benchmark and how to integrate benchmarking into other IT and business projects.

Why benchmark your IT services?

Most housing providers undertake some form of benchmarking their IT services, ranging from using internal staff to evaluate specific IT areas to using external consultants and benchmarking clubs to get a holistic picture of their IT operations and a view of how they compare with their peers.

The most common reason for undertaking IT service benchmarking is to find out if the service is delivering value for money, closely followed by the need to demonstrate that particular services are delivering the right service levels and meeting end-user and tenant expectations.

"Benchmarking works best if you have a few metrics you want to measure and you find a small number of broadly similar organisations which are prepared to share their data on those metrics in exchange for you sharing the results."

Claire Bayliss, director of IT consulting, Montal

Claire Bayliss, director of IT consulting at Montal, said, "The key justification for benchmarking is generally to establish whether the service is delivering value for money – how much do you spend compared to others and how much do you achieve with that compared with others – on several occasions, heads of IT have complained to me that their finance director has seen the Housemark benchmarking figures and decided that their IT department was too expensive! Benchmarking can also be useful when a service is being reviewed – I have used it to justify increasing in staffing."

The Dutch housing consultancy, F-fectis, breaks IT service benchmarking into four core areas: how do our IT costs compare with other housing providers; how do IT service levels compare with others; what are the best practices or average outcomes of the peer group; what are the opportunities for lowering IT costs?

Tim Cowland, senior consultant at Sovereign Business Integration Group, said, "Benchmarking can be an essential tool to help an organisation ensure it is getting value for money and quality from its IT service. The process can help provide reassurance to management that their IT spending is on track and comparable with similar sizes and types of organisations. Benchmarks on the quality of services being delivered are also an important aspect to make sure value for money is being achieved and 'customer' expectations are being met."

This view was shared by Kate Nelson, executive director for corporate services at BPHA, who said, "Benchmarking is a critical tool for establishing whether internal, external and managed services are delivering value for money."

How to benchmark

A key part of benchmarking is not only knowing what you want to measure but also knowing how you will use the resulting benchmarking information. As Montal's Bayliss explained, "Generally, benchmarking works best if you have a few metrics you want to measure, and you find a small number of broadly similar organisations which are prepared to share their data on those metrics in exchange for you sharing the results."

Cowland said, "Benchmarking typically falls into two categories. The first is benchmarking costs, often shown as a proportion of turnover, cost per member of staff or cost per tenant, and the second is the benchmarking of quality data. This gives a housing provider a complete picture of the investment it is making in IT services and of the resulting benefits. They can then use the benchmarking data to monitor performance internally to see how it changes year on year."

"We see benchmarking as a tool because the comparison of IT costs is not an end in itself; it is a means for housing providers to change based on the outcome of the benchmarking."

Henk Korevaar, founder of the F-fectis housing consultancy (The Netherlands)

Henk Korevaar, founder of F-fectis, said, "Our Dutch benchmarking studies over the past 12 years have focused on total cost of ownership. It's important to note

that TCO is about cost, not spending; the TCO comprises the annual operating costs and the annual costs of amortisations. For example, if a housing provider spends £100,000 on replacing an application, then that application 'only' costs £20,000 in that year (based on amortisation over five years), not £100,000."

Standalone project or integrated campaign

The consensus view is that benchmarking IT services is merely part of a wider strategy, with the benchmarking results used as part of a wider strategy for change or measuring the results of existing programmes.

"One risk with benchmarking is that it can breed complacency if not managed properly. It is really important that we get to the point where all housing providers use benchmarking as a minimum criterion, as opposed to the end goal."

Glen Lewis, UK housing sector manager, Northgate Public Services

Glen Lewis, UK housing sector manager for Northgate Public Services, said, "We recommend that housing providers build benchmarking into their wider business strategies. Fluidity in operational activities and the ability to adapt to constant change can be driven by great IT service, but it is only part of a means to an end in terms of delivering operational and strategic excellence."

BPHA's Nelson said, "For us, this is part of a wider continuous improvement strategy of ensuring both internal and external service costs are minimised whilst service levels are improved."

Korevaar added, "Benchmarking is the basis for change. Benchmarking is basically learning from others, such as information exchange between benchmarking participants. We see benchmarking as a tool because the comparison of IT costs is not an end in itself; it is a means for housing providers to change based on the outcome of the benchmarking."

What to benchmark

Bayliss said, "The most common benchmarks are total cost, although that's not always straightforward as that depends on what you count as an IT cost, and staffing levels although that depends on how much

Benchmarking IT services

is outsourced, and whether some IT services are provided by other teams, for example IT training is carried out by HR."

Housing providers need to have realistic expectations of how much they can benchmark, and to what level of detail. Sovereign's Cowland said, "The list is endless in terms of the possibilities, but housing providers should be careful not to overdo the process and make the task too onerous. It is really a case of 'horses for courses'."

As an example, F-fectis' Dutch benchmarking studies cover six IT areas: workplace PCs and standard Windows and Office software; LANs, storage, back-up devices and peripherals; external voice and data connections; business applications (such as CRM and HMS) and associated hardware; fixed and mobile telephony; IT personnel; and tactical and strategic IT management.

Peer review and other business sectors

The value of benchmarking figures can be augmented by comparing them with similar figures from other housing providers, and in some cases with companies in other business sectors. However, with the latter two options, a common problem is ensuring that the data in question is comparable and that 'apples' aren't being compared with 'pears'.

> "The list is endless in terms of the benchmarking possibilities, but housing providers should be careful not to overdo the process and make the task too onerous. It is really a case of 'horses for courses'."
>
> Tim Cowland, senior consultant, Sovereign Business Integration Group

Cowland said, "In general, a comparison with similar organisations gives the most value. This approach gives validity to figures in the sense that all participants are on the same playing field, and therefore removes an element of ambiguity. Having said that, there are occasions when it can be healthy to benchmark against different sectors. This may be the case when you know that another sector excels in a given generic area and that this is an area your organisation would like to improve."

Northgate's Lewis said, "Many housing providers have joined benchmarking groups with their peers. The benefits of this include being able to measure consistently within the sector and therefore driving competition. Some housing providers have now started benchmarking their performance against organisations outside the sector as this bring a different perspective and a greater

degree of commercialisation to the benchmarking exercise, and allows housing providers to expand their knowledge and experience of good practice outside the sector."

Minimum standards and target goals

The question of whether benchmarks should be used as the basis for minimum standards or to set future targets polarises opinions. On the one hand, some head of IT might take the view that as long as their services meet the benchmarking figures then nothing needs doing, as Northgate's Lewis explained, "One risk with benchmarking is that it can breed complacency if not managed properly. It is really important that we get to the point where all housing providers use benchmarking as a minimum criterion, as opposed to the end goal."

On the other hand, other heads of IT might use benchmarks as guidelines for the ideal 'future state' IT operating model. Sovereign's Cowland said, "Benchmarks should be used to set targets rather than achieve minimum standards. If an organisation wants to improve its IT services, benchmark targets which are realistic yet challenging should be set. This not only develops a continuous improvement culture, but also gives the IT team a motivational incentive to reach the targets."

In some cases, there is the danger that the benchmark figures end up having unintended consequences. Montal's Bayliss said, "I have done some benchmarking for the Southern IT Forum and it was interesting that the ratio of staff to properties has been very close to 1:1,000 for the last 10 years, making me wonder whether people are resourcing to the benchmark; in effect the tail is wagging the dog."

In-house staff vs. external staff

In common with many IT projects, smaller benchmarking projects are frequently handled using internal resources while bigger projects often benefit from the experience of external consultants, with the added benefit that although externally-resourced consultants are more expensive, they tend to be seen as more valid and less prone to the effects of internal vested interests.

As BPHA's Nelson said, "We use in-house staff to survey and assess service levels annually, but for the big stuff it has to be external in order to get the right perspective and gain buy-in from our internal customers."

Despite representing an external company offering benchmarking services, Bayliss

said, "It doesn't always need external resources; if you only have a small number of metrics you want to benchmark and some good friends, go ahead internally!"

> "Benchmarking is part of a wider continuous improvement strategy of ensuring both internal and external service costs are minimised whilst service levels are improved."
>
> Kate Nelson, executive director for corporate services, BPHA

Cowland said, "Undertaking the process using internal resources does increase the likelihood that like-for-like comparisons are not being made. Using an external resource does give some consistency if a number of clients are being reviewed using the same approach. Added to this, I have seen a greater degree of scepticism around results prepared internally, particularly if they paint a very positive picture of an organisation. Bringing in an external resource gives an element of objectivity and, in some people's eyes, a more valid set of results."

Benchmarking frequency

There's little to be gained from benchmarking too often, with most people thinking that benchmarking every one to two years. Nelson said, "I find it's useful to look at the basics annually, and in particular customer service levels need to be monitored and benchmarked frequently, with an external assessment every two to three years."

Bayliss said, "You may want to benchmark before and after a significant change, for example a merger or a stock transfer, but otherwise benchmark every three years at the most, I would have thought. Equally, you may decide not to benchmark at all; one of our customers has decided not to benchmark – what they are interested in is whether they deliver the services their business needs within a budget the business can afford."

F-fectis' Korevaar said, "We have found that if an organisation takes part every two years in one of our annual benchmarking studies, then they can use the outcome of the benchmark to gain insights into IT costs and identify improvements."

Peaks & Plains builds its own app

Peaks & Plains Housing Trust has built its own iPhone and iPad app for tenants, giving them access to the latest information about their account, whether that's finding out when their repairs appointment is or how much their next rent payment will be. It also allows them to report repairs or anti-social behaviour.

Following specialist training, the app was developed completely in-house by a member of Peaks and Plains' IT department. The app can also be easily customised for other housing providers.

Simon Penaluna, assistant director of IT, Peaks & Plains Housing Trust, said, "We wanted to offer our tenants an app but we couldn't find one that would suit their needs, so we developed one ourselves! The app has now been launched on iTunes and we're planning to develop an Android version for other smartphone users soon."

HMS portal for Wolverhampton Homes

Wolverhampton Homes has developed a new self-service portal to help its tenants get online, with the portal linking direct to live and up-to-date data in its Northgate housing management system. This mean that tenants can serve themselves in the same way as they can when banking online or using online retail services.

The site went live in September 2012 and has been well received by Wolverhampton Homes' tenants. The housing provider is now working with Northgate to develop the service further, including the introduction of choosing and booking repair appointments online to reduce calls to its contact centre.

Eamonn McGirr, head of ICT, Wolverhampton Homes, said, "We are acting now so that when universal credit is introduced, our tenants will be confident using the internet and able to apply online. Our 'Money Smart' team will be visiting tenants to help them sign up to the portal as well as showing them how it works and discussing good money management."

Livin engages tenants with Orchard

Orchard's rapid application development team has been extending its Campaign Management module to support a community engagement project being run by Livin. The housing provider wants to support its tenants by carrying out tenancy visits and interviewing tenants to find out if they have particular needs around the health, social and financial aspects of their lives. The visits are carried out quarterly during the first year of each tenancy and annually thereafter.

During the visits, household and personal data is collected and updated, with the visiting officer also completing questionnaires covering a range of issues, such as if they discover that the tenant is significantly in debt.

Livin had originally planned to manage the whole process using Outlook calendars, spreadsheets and paper forms but it had no plan for how or where the data would be captured and how it could be used to update its existing Orchard housing management system.

Orchard enhanced its Campaign Management module to allow Livin to define not only questionnaires and surveys but also personal profile data. The updated module prompts Livin staff to make tenancy visits based on rules such as the age of the tenancy and its location, and is based on a booking process integrated with Microsoft Outlook so that appointment clashes are avoided and staff only need to use a single diary.

The module will also be available as an iPad, Android or Windows Surface app later this year.

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Liquid Voice and Ember Services offer speech analytics for housing

Call-recording specialist Liquid Voice has partnered with customer management consultancy Ember Services to offer speech analytics as a managed service for housing providers. The new service combines Liquid Voice's call-recording technology with Ember's managed analytics capabilities.

The end-to-end solution will capture tenant conversations and analyse their content to provide insights that will help Liquid Voice's housing customers to improve tenant services, reduce call centre operating costs and meet regulatory obligations.

Chris Berry, business development director, Liquid Voice, said, "Many housing providers are keen to maximise their investment in call recording to generate additional benefits. With Ember, we can apply speech analytics to recorded calls and provide consultancy to interpret the findings. And because this is a managed service, customers don't have any capital investments in technology, expensive skills' development or ongoing management costs."

David Naylor, head of analytics, Ember Services, said, "We have pioneered the use of speech analytics as a good way of generating robust insight into our clients' customer management operations.

"For example, the London Borough of Merton has used the insights gained from our analytics to solve problems that prevent 43 per cent of calls being resolved at first contact, shift 23 per cent of phone calls to lower cost channels and to eliminate 16 per cent of calls deemed 'avoidable'."

Capita's review of tenant communications

Capita's software services business has just completed a review of tenants' technology preferences and the barriers around the wider use of technology, based on data from a cross-section of social housing tenants, supported or sheltered housing residents, and homeless service users.

The survey found that mobile phones have surpassed landline phones in terms of their ubiquity, with 94 per cent of respondents owning a mobile phone compared with 83 per cent having a landline. The only respondents without a mobile phone, or access to one, were over the age of 55.

David Solomons, Head of Project Management, Family Mosaic

David Solomons, head of project management, Family Mosaic, said, "Digital communication has come along in leaps and bounds but still fails a number of vulnerable citizens. Even though mobile phones are generally considered to increase connectivity between different groups, it can also cause unexpected problems.

"For example, the survey showed that over half of the respondents had changed their mobile number within the last three years, with the majority of the homeless service users having changed their number less than a year ago. Customers hopping between contracts and switching numbers makes it difficult for us when we are trying to tailor services and maintain regular contact with vulnerable people."

The survey found widespread ownership of computers with internet access, with 70 per cent of respondents using it daily, but there was little evidence of the internet being used to receive or access services from registered providers (rather than simply accessing information and general web browsing).

Radojka Miljevic, Senior consultant, Campbell Tickell

Radojka Miljevic, senior consultant, Campbell Tickell, said, "This review suggests that affordability and confidence are potential barriers to people's engagement with technology. However training was the most popular intervention in terms of encouraging the use of the internet and related technologies."

Cloud Business and Caltech IT partner for tenant CRM

Cloud Business, a Microsoft SharePoint specialist, and Caltech IT, a Microsoft Dynamics CRM specialist and developer of the TenantViewCRM software, have formed a partnership to integrate TenantViewCRM with Dynamics CRM and SharePoint specifically for housing providers.

With tenant information at its core, TenantViewCRM provides a universal search facility on tenants, contracts, properties and enquiries. The integration of SharePoint specifically for the needs of housing providers will add seamless electronic document and records management to the system.

Phil Callaghan from Caltech IT said, "It's exciting to integrate SharePoint with TenantViewCRM. This releases the power of both Microsoft technologies while making a great difference to residents' lives. TenantViewCRM focuses on the tenants and links information for call-centre efficiency. Having documentation relating to the tenant or property at their fingertips will empower call-centre staff to close more calls with first time resolution."

Housing Technology 2013
– *One month to go!*

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2013 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

With around a month to go before our fourth annual Housing Technology conference and executive forum (21 February, Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry), we can finally publish the full list of speakers, presentations, sponsors and exhibitors. Delegate places are still available; you can reserve your place via **www.housing-technology/conference.**

For our fourth consecutive conference, we have more speakers, sponsors and exhibitors than ever before but in spite of that, we have actually reduced our delegate prices (£195 if booked before 25 January) since last year to reflect everyone's tighter budgets.

Please note that this year we are again holding our very popular pre-event evening drinks reception at the Oxford Belfry on Wednesday 20 February to which all speakers, delegates, sponsors and exhibitors are invited. The pre-event reception will also include an informal talk from John Bird, founder and editor-in-chief of the Big Issue magazine.

Speakers and presentations

1ST TOUCH
The future for mobile technology in social housing
ROBERT DENT, CEO

AAREON
The changing role of IT
BEL HOLT, PRE-SALES CONSULTANT & ACCOUNT MANAGER

ACCENT FOUNDATION
Where credit is due
ANDREW KIDDS, REACTIVE REPAIRS MANAGER

ACCENT GROUP
IT-led change: standardising your working practices
STUART DUTHIE, HEAD OF ICT
MHARI BYRNE, BUSINESS SYSTEMS MANAGER

ADACTUS HOUSING GROUP
The performance matrix: technology meets staff management
PAUL LEES, GROUP CHIEF EXECUTIVE
BRIAN MORAN, GROUP DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

ADVANCED 365 & MICROSOFT
Microsoft and Advanced 365: collaboration in working
HARRY WEST, SOLUTIONS ARCHITECT FOR COLLABORATION, ADVANCED 365
STEVE DOUGLAS, MICROSOFT LYNC TECHNOLOGY ADVISOR, MICROSOFT

AFFINITY SUTTON
Mobile working in caretaking, grounds maintenance and bulk refuse collections
RICHARD SWIFT, HEAD OF BUSINESS INTEGRATION

ALLIANCE HOMES
Reviewing the asset management infrastructure
MICK CAPERN, BUSINESS SYSTEMS MANAGER

ASHTON PIONEER HOMES
Social media: the business case and psychology
PETER MARLAND, DIRECTOR OF HOUSING
JENNA CONDIE, LECTURER IN PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD

BT
Making technology work for people
HUMPHREY PENNEY, DIRECTOR OF BT CUSTOM SOLUTIONS

Keynote speakers and presentations

SIR CLIVE WOODWARD, OBE

World Cup Winner and Team GB's Director of Sport for the London Olympics

THE FUTURE OF HOUSING: LEARNING FROM THE WORLD OF TOP-LEVEL SPORT
Sir Clive Woodward OBE, World Cup Winner and Team GB's Director of Sport for the London Olympics, will give the keynote presentation at Housing Technology 2013. During his keynote presentation, Clive will demonstrate what social housing providers of all sizes can learn from the world of sport, and how the key principles to building high performance in sport can be applied to day-to-day IT and business operations.

JOHN BIRD

Founder and Editor-in-Chief, The Big Issue

LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATION AND LEARNING FROM YOUR MISTAKES
John Bird will give a typically 'trenchant and robust' talk during the pre-event evening drinks reception. John speaks clearly and powerfully and his message is simple: it's about motivation, leadership, drive, learning from your mistakes, and turning rejection into something positive. He has been homeless, an offender and an addict. Yet he's achieved a lot more than many who started life with more advantages than him.

CIRCLE
From reactive support to proactive customer engagement
SAM BROWN, DIRECTOR OF IS&T CUSTOMER SERVICE
SIMON HUTCHINSON, IS&T CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGER

CISCO
A look into the future
IAN FODDERING, CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER & TECHNICAL DIRECTOR, UK & IRELAND

CITY WEST HOUSING TRUST
Going from good to great
TIM DOYLE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE
MARTIN BARBER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, IT & FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

CLOUDXL
Direct payments: the challenges and lessons learnt from other sectors
JOHN HARRIS, CEO

CONSULTEAST
Cloud solutions for housing management
JOHN PAUL, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

CONVERGEONE
Getting the IT foundations right
PAUL DAY, TECHNICAL DESIGN AUTHORITY

EQUANET
The art of the possible
MATT ROBERTS, CLOUD SPECIALIST

F-FECTIS
Going Dutch: the new ways of working
HENK KOREVAAR, FOUNDER

FIRST WESSEX
Value for money: simply doing things better
PATRICK SYMINGTON, FINANCE, PLANNING & ICT DIRECTOR
NEIL CHARLTON, HEAD OF ICT

GALLIONS HOUSING ASSOCIATION
Using Microsoft SharePoint to reduce costs
ALI JAFFRI, ICT MANAGER

GENTOO GROUP
Mobilising housing staff
STEVE GREEN, PROJECT DELIVERY MANAGER

HAVEBURY HOUSING PARTNERSHIP
In-house development using HTML5, CSS and Javascript
PAUL ROWLEY, HEAD OF INFORMATION SERVICES

ISOS HOUSING
Desktop virtualisation: fires, floods and chocolate hedgehogs
JOHN SAMMONS, ICT SERVICES & TECHNICAL MANAGERES

JMC IT
Maintaining data control within a flexible access strategy
MARK SUMMERS, HEAD OF TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS
PETER WILSON, SENIOR TECHNICAL ARCHITECT

ORBIT GROUP
Social business: the role of technology as an enabler of business transformation
DAVID LEACH, DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY & TRANSFORMATION
SELINA OLAH, FINANCE DIRECTOR

ORCHARD INFORMATION SYTEMS
Orchard's innovative response to the challenges of welfare reform
AIDAN DUNPHY, PRODUCT MANAGER

PEABODY
The role of social housing in bridging the digital divide
SIGAL DWYER, HEAD OF DIGITAL

SOLIHULL COMMUNITY HOUSING
Getting serious about online repairs
CHRIS DEERY, HEAD OF ICT

SOVEREIGN BUSINESS INTEGRATION GROUP
BYOD (bring your own device) in social housing
CHARLES BROOKS, PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT

SOVEREIGN HOUSING ASSOCIATION
Evolving IT to innovate and support business transformation
JOHN POLLITT, CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER

THAMES VALLEY HOUSING ASSOCIATION
Fishing where the fish are: online customer engagement
JAYNE HILDITCH, CORPORATE SERVICES DIRECTOR

THE HAVEN WOLVERHAMPTON
Weathering a storm: big systems for a small housing provider
ELVIRA WILSON, HEAD OF BUSINESS SUPPORT SERVICES
ADAM CHLUDZINSKI, ICT SUPPORT OFFICER

THE HYDE GROUP
How to implement an IT strategy
MR RASHPAL KULLAR, HEAD OF ICT ARCHITECTURE STRATEGY & COMPLIANCE

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JMC IT secures Arcon Housing's IT infrastructure

A long-term infrastructure and business continuity project by JMC IT at Arcon Housing in Manchester is now delivering day-to-day benefits to the housing provider's staff, board members and tenants in areas such as mobility and flexible working, internal communications, and universal credit.

JMC IT installed a virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) to take processing away from desktop PCs to an off-site location and a Demand IT Online Backup system so that all computer activity from Arcon's staff can be streamed securely via the internet to a remote data centre.

The Demand IT platform consists of a centralised virtual network infrastructure to free up servers and equipment, making tasks run faster and saving money that would otherwise have to be spent on new kit. The VDI gives Arcon staff more flexibility and the ability to access their desktops wherever they are. Furthermore, Arcon's housing officers are currently trialling tablet computers which could eventually replace desktop PCs.

Anne Southern, finance director, Arcon Housing, said, "Not only has the JMC IT platform provided everything we asked for, but it has also allowed staff to work remotely and flexibly. Our housing officers have given such great feedback that we're thinking about rolling this out further. For example, we are considering giving our board members direct access to the IT system so they can really get involved and share information, something which simply wasn't possible in the past."

Arcon is also trialling the use of mobile devices for day-to-day activities. Although the changes resulting from the introduction of universal credit are still unclear, Arcon believes that mobile devices could be used to help tenants with the new benefit application processes.

Southern said, "Many of our tenants can't afford their own computers so if the universal credit changes happen as predicted, we're planning to give our housing officers internet-enabled mobile devices that they can take to tenants' homes. Housing officers will then sit with each person and go through their online application to ensure they do not miss out on benefits. None of this would have been possible without the backing of a reliable IT platform."

Sovereign wins infrastructure contract with Gateway Housing

Gateway Housing Association has awarded a 12-month managed services contract to Sovereign Business Integration Group to refresh its IT infrastructure. The £150,000 contract began in October 2012.

Sovereign will conduct an IT infrastructure review, refresh Gateway's IT infrastructure, and manage improvements to its overall IT environment. The contract is also intended to open the possibility of Gateway delivering shared IT services to other organisations.

Gateway selected the managed services provider following a tender process and based on recommendations from Tower Hamlets Community Housing Group and East End Homes who are both Sovereign customers.

Helen Routledge, finance director, Gateway Housing Association, said, "We are keen to see a long-term improvement to our IT support as well as improvements in the reliability of our infrastructure."

New applications consultant appointed
Kevin Hall, Applications Consultant, Sovereign Business Integration Group
Sovereign has appointed Kevin Hall as an applications consultant within its housing and public sector division. He has worked in the housing sector for over 10 years and will provide ad-hoc systems consultancy, project management and applications support.

Within the role of applications consultant, Hall will provide on-site support for core housing and financial systems, end-user training and run workshops and group sessions.

HomeSwapper hits one million registrations

The UK mutual exchange HomeSwapper has just reached over one million registrations from tenants who want to advertise their properties online and swap with other tenants. The company reported that 29,000 households successfully exchanged their homes last year.

In addition, more than 850 housing providers are registered on the service to give over three million households living in social housing free access to the HomeSwapper service.

John Carthew, managing director, Housing Partners, the company behind HomeSwapper, said, "We have worked hard for the past five years to make HomeSwapper the most successful mutual exchange service in the UK and this milestone has proved the value in our efforts. We have also been working to increase our ethical and social impact so welcoming our one millionth member has been a great cause of celebration for all at Housing Partners."

Are the barbarians at the gate?

Mike Eckersley, Senior Consultant, Sector Group

The winds of change are blowing through IT and the housing sector. While change is what makes our lives interesting, this period of change is as much about culture and attitude as it is about technology, and that's causing discomfort in some IT departments.

The role of the ICT manager or head of ICT is undergoing a fundamental change; the old 'gatekeeper' role is no longer tenable and IT managers must adapt to roles that are much more about facilitation. Many are already on this path, but some are finding the change difficult because for decades we have been trying to stop all manner of things, such as keeping the bad guys out and preventing the good guys from being distracted by all that time-sapping internet access!

We have already moved a long way from the days of internet access being restricted to the ICT & HR teams (remember that?) and everyone in the housing sector expects unrestricted internet access (within reason), both at their desk and increasingly in the field. This undoubtedly brings its own challenges, but you can't say "no".

Internet access policies

I remember early web-filter policies that wouldn't let staff visit news, sports or any non-work related pages. We even had to restrict recruitment sites for fear that staff would look for other jobs, but they are less likely to do so without draconian access policies! Heaven forbid that anyone visited Facebook in work time, with regular media stories about staff spending days at a time on Facebook and choking up bandwidth (a scarce resource in those days).

Times have changed. Bandwidth, while still precious, is more readily available and our tenants expect to be able to communicate with us via social media. A generation now exists who have grown up with this so we need staff out there on these networks, engaging with tenants.

The benefits of social media in housing is an article in its own right but suffice to say that we can't expect tenants to engage if our staff don't, and the staff won't if they don't have access. The old time-sapping argument is now obsolete as most people will have internet access on their own devices even if we stop them using ours.

Bring your own device

This brings us to the next change. As well as the internet, we also have to deal with the increasing use of smartphones, tablets and other connected hardware; what do we allow and what do we block? If we open the mail server to company mobile devices, it's not long before users want access from their own devices. We can (and should) use any of the mobile device management techniques and platforms, but what will you do when a user reports that the kit you gave him can't get a signal on his patch but his own device can, except that you've blocked it…

Start thinking about users bringing their own devices to work (they're almost certainly already doing so) because if you lead the change, you have a greater chance of keeping things in the open and retaining control of system security. With a robust policy, develop a situation where users are happy because they have kit with which they feel comfortable but you can still stop unauthorised access, data leakage and malware threats, and you may even save money!

Struggling with change

Most ICT managers are seeing these difficulties more frequently, from the service desk to the boardroom. Technology doesn't spread in hierarchies; you are as likely to find an iPad in the hands of a tradesman as in the hands of a director. Increasingly, our CEOs and senior executives are hearing about the strides others are making with smart devices, BYOD, and social media, and want to do the same. If you're lucky, they might be aware of the challenges associated with them and listen to your advice on how to get the best out of these concepts safely, but this is unlikely if you are still adopting an old-fashioned 'gatekeeper' stance.

What's the answer?

ICT managers need to find ways of embracing change without compromising security and to find innovative ways not just to allow these technologies into the workplace, but to champion them and educate senior managers and others about their benefits while retaining control of the systems and boundaries which facilitate their use. As mentioned earlier, after decades of "just say no", this can be a difficult leap to make but the rewards of leading the charge are far greater than being dragged along reluctantly. If it's your strategy, you will be able to make certain that timescales are realistic to allow the necessary changes to be made to security policies and systems in a safe and controlled manner.

Many of your colleagues who espouse the new media revolution don't fully understand it or its implications so use your technical knowledge to great advantage here, and if you have someone who is keen and who really understands, get them on board early and use their expertise as well.

It's not just about the technology so champion the different benefits to end-users, the business and tenants. These are the factors that drive engagement, both inside the organisation and outside with tenants, suppliers and other stakeholders. People won't follow you just because you want them to; they have to see a tangible benefit. I've even had users who refused to charge their company mobile overnight because they didn't want to pay for the electricity, so they're not likely to use their own mobile device for work unless you can demonstrate how it benefits them.

So what next?

- Education – the benefits of education cannot be overstressed. This is complex and challenging so you need to understand what's going on by taking advantage of seminars, conferences and webinars to keep yourself up-to-date on the latest thinking. The blogosphere is full of articles about these topics, take the time to read them – and do it at work to practice what you preach!

- Communicate – talk to other ICT managers to find out what they are doing. We are fortunate that the relative lack of competition between housing providers means that most ICT managers are happy to share what they are up to and how they are dealing with current challenges. And if you aren't a member of a housing IT forum, join one as these are excellent places for exactly these sorts of discussions.

- Engage – take the plunge if you haven't already done so because how can you champion otherwise? Get a Twitter account and look at other housing providers' Facebook pages as they give you good ideas about what works well. Try connecting some mobile devices to your network (for more than just email & calendar) and try them with selected members of staff to see if you can identify where they would make a real difference.

If we are in the driving seat, we still have control, and we do need to keep hold of security, even if it looks different…

Mike Eckersley is a senior consultant at Sector Group.

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EVENTS 2013

Driving business innovation through IT

Left: Benny Brown, Operations Director, Tactica Partners
Right: John Wynn, Services Director, Tactica Partners

Do you manage your own IT? Are you consistently satisfied with its current performance and cost, or do you struggle to meet your expectations? The chances are that you feel there is some level of improvement possible but for many people this is becoming difficult to achieve as we are inundated with a growing amount of information and faced with ever more hype around IT. The landscape has become more complex, to say the least.

Most IT fundamentals remain the same but there is a growing number of emerging capabilities, such as cloud computing, big data, open source software, web 2.0 and converged infrastructures. All of these offer benefits but they can be confusing when you try to understand how they apply to your organisation. Suppliers naturally want to sell you software, hardware and services but who is thinking about what you really need and when is it right for your business? What does 'good' look like for your organisation?

Marketing hype and competitive friction

Over the years, IT suppliers have invented new and interesting ways of promoting their products and services while marketing departments create cycles of hype and competitive friction; they hit you with a barrage of brochures and presentations that graphically illustrate how backward you are when it comes to understanding and taking on new technologies. Great marketing, but what are the benefits for you?

We all know the buzzwords, but the bad news is that it's also your job to understand them all and to advise your senior management on what they mean and which direction the company should take.

Analyse what you need

Let's take a more familiar example. Before I buy a new car, I analyse what I need and in my case, this is generally based around comfort, such as air conditioning, Bluetooth, heated seats, power steering and parking sensors. I create a matrix of what's available and try not to get diverted by the various options I never knew I needed. Hey presto, I quickly realise that I can't afford a new car with everything I want and so avoid the subject for another six months.

At this stage you are perhaps wondering what this has to do with housing technology. Let's get back to basics and see if we can find the link. What do we know?

1. Your board wants everything on their tablets.
2. The IT suppliers want you to buy into their cycle of hype.
3. Your tenants want contactless payments and to access your services via smartphones.
4. Everyone in your organisation wants a better laptop or phone, a faster network and a widget for ordering coffee from the machine before they leave their desk.

How can you please everyone? First, you need to know who your customers are. Let me help you on this one. Your customers are everyone who relies on your IT department. So that's generally every member of staff from the board downwards, all of your suppliers and partners, and all of your tenants. They all want different things from you and to be a success you need to understand what these 'wants' are.

It is important to have a sound IT strategy that meets the current and future needs of your customers. Understanding which initiatives to start and in what order, based on your specific needs and current situation, becomes the key factor for effective planning and execution.

Make the benefits relevant

So the question is: what does my organisation need to be successful and how can I help it get there? It's unlikely that anybody in the business worries or cares which service pack you are on or whether you should tier your storage. What they should care about are the benefits of the technology. The finance department will care if you offer to save them money by tiering your storage, and all users should be interested in understanding how a new process or technology makes their job easier or faster. In short, show how you can streamline their operations, make things easier, save them money, make things faster or open up new markets for them.

In order to do that, you first need to understand the current and future requirements of your business users. Sit down with a business manager for an hour, ask them about their job and then think about your role in that. They may only have a laptop and mainly use it for email; fine, you have a role in delivering that service. What is their user experience – is it good, bad or indifferent? This person may want to be more mobile, need a bigger display or want an archive facility.

Have the conversation with everyone on the board individually and see what would make their departments work better. It's almost certain that what they actually want is cost savings, predictability, agile business processes, mobility and security.

Just like the car analogy, work out what your business wants, work out how much it will cost and build a business case. Once you have justified the cost of moving the business (not IT) forward then you can look at who can supply what you need.

Your finance director will want the cheapest solution, but you know that will be accompanied by 'cheerful' service. You naturally want the best, but maybe you don't need such amazing levels of service so perhaps you can find a happy medium.

Talking to the market

The next stage is to ask the market, run a request for proposal (RFP) and make the IT suppliers work for your money. You should make sure that they deliver what you want, not what they want, and be clear and concise about your requirements. Furthermore, create the right partnerships so that you get meaningful service levels and suppliers carry their share of risk.

Whether your priority is cost reduction, service improvement, or innovation for the business, you should:

1. Review the state of your capabilities and understand the gaps and issues.
2. Understand your business's strategy, day-to-day needs and specific requirements.
3. Develop a vision of the 'future state' and a roadmap of initiatives to address the most important issues.
4. Create a business case.
5. Break through the vendor friction – find out if there are benefits behind the buzzwords and establish whether they help move your business forward.

Following these steps helps you to be open and transparent. You are helping the business to develop and you are making a concerted effort to lose the IT mantra of "we're different, we're in IT".

You are part of the business as a service provider to the business, and every part of the business is dependent on IT. Or in other words, every part of the business is dependent on you.

Benny Brown is the operations director and John Wynn is the services director at Tactica Partners.

Telecoms and ICT with a conscience from Social Telecoms

Social Telecoms CIC has launched two new services covering telephony and internet access specifically to help housing providers support their digitally-excluded tenants in the run up to the introduction of universal credit later this year.

For its first service, Social Telecoms has an 'open book' approach to telecoms pricing which means that it charges all residential and corporate customers at cost price with a service charge added for processing the connections and providing customer service for the life of the contract. Social Telecoms said that this transparent pricing model "creates remarkable savings and opens the eyes of customers to the profits generated by other telecoms providers for exactly the same products and services".

The same pricing model is used for Social Telecoms' digital inclusion service, with recycled computers with fully licensed Windows 7 and Office 2007 available for only £66, Google Android computers from £35 and broadband packages from £6/month.

The company's Digital Den franchise offers local training as well as employment opportunities installing and expanding broadband and fixed-line networks.

John Clarke, director, Social Telecoms CIC, said, "We've been involved in the telecoms business with housing providers for over 13 years, negotiating fixed line, mobile and broadband contracts, and we realised that there was a need to deliver digital inclusion as a social service.

"We save our customers money – some of our corporate customers have reported savings of over £25,000 per year on their bills – but we add social value too by helping to bridge the digital divide."

Majority of the public sector lacks BYOD strategy

A recent survey by Acronis, a data backup and disaster recovery company, found that 87 per cent of public sector organisations have no formal strategies to deal with the bring your own device (BYOD) trend. 11 per cent of the local authorities surveyed did have a BYOD strategy but none of the central government departments had a BYOD plan.

Acronis acquired the data on BYOD planning through Freedom of Information Act requests to 48 central and local government organisations, 41 of which complied with the request.

The survey also found that around 25 per cent of the organisations had detected unauthorised devices attached to their networks between 2011 and 2012, while a similar number had no easy way of even detecting whether unauthorised devices had been connected. Furthermore, only around 30 per cent of the organisations had plans to review the case for a BYOD strategy.

Alan Laing, vice president for EMEA, Acronis, said, "Confidential content is regularly leaving the network on tablets, smartphones or via public cloud-based services. The rise of BYOD, the use of corporate file-sharing beyond firewalls and the management of hybrid environments is no longer only a headache for IT management; it's a serious regulatory issue, particularly for the public sector.

"Public sector organisations should review their current practices for managing and protecting traditional devices and then extend them to protect their employees' mobile devices."

Newlon Housing supporting digital inclusion with Student@Home

Student@Home, a social business employing IT students to provide technology support and training to computer users and small businesses, has recently partnered with Newlon Fusion, the community regeneration partner of Newlon Housing Trust.

Student@Home is contracted to deliver up to 80 one-to-one support sessions to residents in their own homes. IT student workers will provide technology support to Newlon residents, helping them to develop basic computing skills, including accessing the internet.

Kelly Klein, founder, Student@Home, said, "By helping with digital inclusion, we provide residents with more choice, control and access to online business and consumer services. To support the initiative, we are appealing to Housing Technology's readers for donations of broken and unwanted computers.

"Instead of these computers getting thrown out and discarded, we want to recycle them. Our team of students will give them an MOT after which they will be donated to residents. And if you are based in London we can even come and collect them."

Viv Nichols, chief officer, Newlon Fusion, said, "This project will enhance residents' online skills and will be launched in advance of the upcoming changes to the welfare system. We can also help residents to access services and gain IT skills that will help them get jobs. At the same time, Newlon Fusion and Student@Home will find a new home for computers with digitally-excluded residents."

Student@Home is a membership service, allowing it to offer call-outs at rates considerably below the market average. Membership costs £24 per year and call-outs are charged at £30 for the first hour and £15 for each additional half-hour.

Free registration at Housing Centre UK

Housing Centre UK, a mutual exchange service for social and affordable housing and part-ownership schemes, is now offering free registration for housing providers across the UK. The site is being developed in the run up to the government's welfare reforms and the introduction of universal credit.

By registering, housing providers will be able to showcase all of their available properties on the site, advertise harder-to-let homes, and link in with their existing choice-based lettings schemes.

Nicola Downey, director, Housing Centre UK, said, "This year will see the biggest changes in welfare benefits for several generations and existing tenants and those looking for low cost housing will need more help than ever to see what choices they have."

Shaw Consulting celebrates its second birthday

As one of the housing sector's youngest IT consultancies, Shaw Consulting has just completed its second year of operations. The company has completed a range of projects for housing providers including business case development to support technology investments, service delivery reviews and ICT infrastructure procurements.

To celebrate its second anniversary, Shaw Consulting developed a specialist transformation and business process review (BPR) framework that uses the principles of Lean and Six Sigma alongside ICT/IS considerations and adapted to the housing and local government sectors from the manufacturing background for which the methodologies were originally developed.

Mark Woosey, group director of IS, Network Housing Group, said, "With a wealth of experience in housing, Shaw Consulting provides an uncommon blend of practical experience with product and sector knowledge, and the ability to deliver good outcomes and solutions through practical, quality management. Shaw Consulting's project management experience is strong and they are an asset to any business."

Housing Technology Research launches 'Spectrum 2013: Review of IT Suppliers'

We are confident that our forthcoming Housing Technology Research report – 'Spectrum 2013: Review of IT Suppliers' will be one of the most comprehensive studies of housing providers' views of their incumbent technology suppliers.

The report comprises the views of 220+ senior IT executives from across the UK, based around 19 main technology areas, resulting in 26,000+ data points. Furthermore, to ensure that there is absolutely no scope for bias, we have eschewed all commercial sponsorship of the report so that we can analyse and report the results without fear or favour.

All survey respondents will automatically be sent a complimentary copy of the report as soon as it is published. Everyone else can place an advance order (with substantial discounts) for the report at **www.housing-technology.com/report.**

The survey and report is broadly split into two areas, comprising:

- **Core business applications, including:** asset management, choice-based lettings & allocations, customer relationship management, document management, financial management, GIS & mapping, housing management, housing planning & development, HR and payroll, job scheduling, mobile working, performance management & reporting, repairs & maintenance, software asset management, and workflow.

- **Infrastructure areas, including:** data centre & co-location, desktop hardware (PC, thin client), DR & business continuity, intranets, network (WAN & LAN), PDAs, smartphones & tablets, remote working, storage, unified communications (incl. telephony), and virtualisation.

For each of the above application and infrastructure areas, respondents were asked to name their technology supplier and then rate their product/service around five key areas comprising: functionality, value for money, project management & implementation, ease of integration, and technical support & customer service.

The report also reviews housing stock and IT staff, covering: total housing stock (owned & managed), total number of sites, total staff, and number of IT staff.

We expect to publish 'Spectrum 2013: Review of IT Suppliers' in February 2013. The report is £295 plus VAT (£595 after 31 January 2013) for housing providers, local councils and other public sector organisations, and £795 plus VAT (£1,295 after 31 January 2013) for IT and technology companies, consultancies and other business service providers.

You can place an advance order for the report at **www.housing-technology.com/report.**

Initial analysis

Although we have only just started our in-depth analysis of the survey data, we can reveal the outline list of the top 15 IT suppliers across all the categories. The list below is only indicative, based on averages from across all survey responses; we are confident that the final findings in the report, particularly within individual technology areas, will vary but the list below is interesting nonetheless.

1. **VMware (68) - 4.2**
2. **In-house (67) - 4.1**
3. **HP (34) - 4.1**
4. **Dell (59) - 4.1**
5. **MIS-AMS (66) - 3.9**
6. **Microsoft (80) - 3.9**
7. **Citrix (47) - 3.9**
8. **Keystone (44) - 3.7**
9. **Consilium (30) - 3.7**
10. **Xmbrace (64) - 3.6**
11. **Infor (62) - 3.6**
12. **Orchard (158) - 3.4**
13. **Capita (218) - 3.2**
14. **Aareon (125) - 3.2**
15. **Northgate (113) – 3.0**

Notes: the figures in brackets refer to the total instances of each supplier within the survey data, with the cut-off point for inclusion in this outline list being a minimum of 30 instances. The second figure is the overall rating, with 5 representing 'very good, meets over 90% of your needs' and 0 representing 'very poor, meets less than 10% of your needs'.

It should be clearly understood that, in the context of the list above, the inclusion or exclusion of IT suppliers says nothing about the reputation or ability of individual IT suppliers within specific application or infrastructure areas; this is merely an aggregated list across all survey respondents and all technology areas.

Shimmying into the future

Sir – You will be well aware of how technology in homes is transforming people's lives, and I thought it would be helpful to outline some recent examples of best practice I have seen.

We would all appreciate real-time travel information to avoid lengthy waits in the rain for a bus, or an accurate picture of how much energy we're using at home so we can save a few pennies on the heating. And touchscreen panels inside every home might be the answer.

We are seeing these pioneering systems installed in homes across the country. It might sound like a gimmick (what new technology doesn't when it's first introduced?) but they can have real benefits… when they work!

At the Triangle in Swindon, the 'Shimmy' is one of the many nudges towards 'one planet living'. It's a small computer screen in the hallway of each home giving minute-by-minute energy readings and real-time transport information, as well as community networks. The idea is that by having something that's always up-to-date and useful, it might be possible to use your car less, to be more in control of which appliances use the most energy, and to know when and how to bring people together.

Swindon residents might use the 'Shimmy' to see if their neighbour has some spare Calpol late at night for the children. They might just as well be outside in the shared kitchen gardens getting fresh vegetables. Renewable materials are not forgotten either and the Homes and Communities Agency and DECC helped the developer to use Hempcrete, a render made from hemp, on the outside of the homes. The big gain is in integrating all these ideas into one harmonious place.

Oh yes, the point about when they work. When we went to see a touchscreen in action the resident proudly switched it on to show us how energy-hungry a washing machine could be, to be met with… resounding silence… computer says no. But it did work eventually and we thought it was great too (plus a top tip from the resident: try washing your clothes at night)!

Jane Briginshaw
Head of design and sustainability, Homes & Communities Agency

Orbiting the world of social media

Sir – Most of us naturally think about technology in terms of new hardware or emerging software which can help to transform the way we work. And of course, as we have seen with the recent deployment of iPads to housing teams, new equipment and systems can drive a step change in efficiency, effectiveness and service.

But that's only part of the story. In recent months we have begun to explore how less tangible concepts such as social media, connectivity and culture might be as important as the latest technological innovation in shaping our business transformation in the future.

We've encouraged our people to experiment with social media in engaging more directly with our customers and communities, and indeed with each other on an open source 'Orbit Twitter' feed on our intranet. Small steps, it's true, but the start of an exciting journey which is more cultural than technological.

Ultimately, this type of approach could see us develop a culture where empowerment, co-production and connectivity replace hierarchy and traditional, formal relationships, both internally and externally. Our structures may become flatter and the barriers between staff and customers more permeable.

We are only at the start of the journey. And the destination towards becoming a truly 'social business' is not yet entirely clear. But we believe that tomorrow's world will be as much about how you do business, as what technology you use to do business.

Paul Tennant
CEO, Orbit Group

Please submit your response to any of these letters or your own letter by sending an email to *news@housing-technology.com*. Again, we had a rather large postbag for this issue; the remaining letters will be published in the March 2013 issue.

Going Blackberry picking

Sir – A few years ago RIM [makers of the Blackberry devices] were the de-facto standard for secure email delivery. Then along came Apple and Android-based smartphones that pushed the envelope in terms of functionality, but if you have already invested in Blackberry devices, why change now?

A year ago, companies fell over themselves to replace their original Blackberries; some may have had good reasons for doing so, but it's no surprise to me that they are returning to Blackberry, and in large numbers.

The next few months are no doubt important to RIM; I just feel that if you have a large Blackberry 'fleet' then you should stick with them. Yes, embrace diversity so that if someone wants an iPhone, let them have it as long as you have stringent security policies and you can deliver secure email alongside appropriate software for mobile device management.

But it may be a case of 'throwing out the baby with the bath water' if you don't give RIM the opportunity to get back in the game. This time next year you may be happy that you did…

Nick Crane
Head of IT operations, Family Mosaic

Kiss and make up

Sir – Can your readers, hand on heart, say their current suppliers deliver innovation, excellent service, business outcomes from proven solutions and, of course, value for money? Reading last month's letters, I got the impression that many people in the housing sector are frustrated with suppliers in one or more of these areas. So why do people put up with it?

Innovation is born when one understands the problem and can identify and implement a solution to it. Excellent service is derived from truly understanding what customers want, when they want it and doing something about it when it's not right. Business outcomes from proven solutions occur when suppliers and customers work together to see through an idea and ensure the business outcomes actually happen. Value for money is obtained when you measure what you set out to achieve and find that you gained the benefit (or hopefully more) that you expected.

They all involve listening and building strong and meaningful relationships to deliver successful outcomes. Ask your supplier to show you how they innovate and what they have innovated, how they deliver excellent customer service and prove business outcomes. Finally, how they deliver value for money to their customers. Also ask how they will build these valuable and ever more important relationships with you? Do you believe what they are telling you?

If you don't, why put up with it? It's New Year, time for a resolution, be brave and do something about the mediocrity or worse in your supply chain. I'm writing this in December 2012 and I feel good about it already.

On the flip side, when you do find a good supplier, work with them, see what they do in the round; you might be surprised about how far the relationship can go, the breadth of what they deliver and the beneficial outcomes you could be enjoying.

One letter last month speculated whether KISS would be the next big thing in IT. I tend to agree in part, but I would extend it further to say: listen, KISS, work together and measure what arises! Let's have a great year together.

Mark Hobart
Managing director, Clearview

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The bigger picture

Sir – Britannic recently got together with Family Mosaic's staff and tenants to transform a dilapidated and overgrown yard into a community garden in true 'Ground Force' style!

This set me thinking; while we were happy to contribute funds and resources to make this small contribution to the lives of tenants, how could we expand this to benefit a wider community?

As part of new initiatives such as the Social Value Act 2012 and Digital by Default, there is so much more that can be achieved across the housing sector. How about if we could combine facets of CSR, digital inclusion and the Social Value Act to create a true 'social network' using the advances in technology and the economies of scale possible across the housing sector and the wider community?

We have been working with housing providers for many years to deliver cost savings and efficiencies while improving frontline services and access to enabling technologies. For example, we recently extended IP telephony across Family Mosaic's 210+ locations to provide free 'on-net' calls.

With suitable planning and control with HAs, this social network could be expanded further across housing providers, tenants and tenant businesses to offer affordable shared internet access and low cost 'on-net' services such as telephony, video, CCTV across the community.

By scaling this concept throughout the housing sector, not only could we deliver increased value to housing providers and their tenants, we could also extend the shared services model to support tenant enterprises with access to centralised IT and telecoms. Working together on a local level with the big picture in mind, we could really accelerate digital inclusion and social value initiatives.

Jonathan Sharp
Sales & marketing director, Britannic Technologies

Blurring the boundaries

Sir – It strikes me that many housing providers have a slightly misunderstood view of their strategic priorities which then permeate down and affect effective service delivery and the successful alignment of ICT. Housing providers primarily manage assets and are therefore operationally excellent, meaning they deliver high-quality, repeatable services at low cost. Of course, there is a social agenda, which requires a certain degree of customer intimacy, but the primary driver is operational excellence.

Once this view is accepted, you can pursue a strategy that enables information and processes to be owned across many functions and the selection of technology can be based on delivery against these requirements. I have come across many organisations in this sector that have functional boundaries which have been created through either misunderstood priorities or irrelevant internal policies.

This results in silos of processes and ultimately fragmented information systems, hampering effective service delivery and visibility of business performance. The only way a social agenda can be achieved is through high performance service delivery and relevant supporting technology.

Alistair McLeod
Director, Waterstons

Free maps for all

Sir – I am still amazed at how many housing providers do not know about the free maps they can get their hands on. As housing is so location-focused, meaning much of the data held in a housing organisation is based around properties and neighbourhoods, using mapping provides an additional level of understanding that tables in spreadsheets and databases just cannot deliver.

For example, planned maintenance schedules may extend the length of a street, cover a postcode, or an estate. Without visualising where the properties are located on a map, it is possible to miss a vital opportunity to make savings by including nearby streets or postcodes in the same schedule. For example, one housing provider recently made a substantial gain using maps – a search was carried out to find all legal ownership areas that did not contain at least one of their properties; one finding was a block of flats that was owned by the housing association but managed by a local council. Once management was correctly transferred back to the housing association, two properties were vacated and sold at auction.

As another example, last year the Ordnance Survey made many of its mapping products available free of charge through the OpenData program and other free mapping projects and resources are available such as OpenStreetMap that provide fantastic coverage of the UK and the rest of the world. Use of mapping has the potential to deliver huge savings for housing providers; they should consider how they can benefit from this resource.

Fergus Craig
Business development manager, Cadcorp

Getting ready for universal credit

Sir – The benefits system is due for its biggest shake-up in more than 60 years with the impending launch of universal credit. Not only will the change be radical for citizens who currently receive benefits, but also for the organisations that provide support services. Among the housing providers recently surveyed by Capita's software services business, around 70 per cent expected that universal credit may lead to an increase in rent arrears. This is a worrying figure not only for housing providers but also for tenants; the results suggest that tenants will need more support than ever.

When budgets are tight, online payments and direct debit offer the cheapest and fastest ways of collecting payments. While they are both important channels, they're not the only ones, and many tenants either don't have access to them or prefer not to use them. We need to work together to avoid excluding the vulnerable by making it as easy as possible for tenants to pay their rent and seek personal support, whether that is by direct debit, over the counter, telephone, mobile 'doorstep' collection or online.

Although rent arrears is a perceived issue, only around 20 per cent of the people surveyed by us mentioned that they were concerned about an increase in workload. But if rent isn't being paid, then it has to be chased – a complex process that is resource-intensive and expensive and could rob tenants of the one-to-one support they might need.

As housing providers ready themselves for universal credit, it's time to look closely at the supporting technology they have in place. Integrating payment channels and automating updates with their housing management software is vital to ensure that all of the benefits can be accrued. Technology is a valuable supporting tool, but only if it runs through the core of an organisation.

Roger Birkinshaw
Housing director, Capita's software services business

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Joined-up scheduling

Sir – We have all spent time scratching our heads trying to understand how we can continue to drive efficiencies through our organisations, yet balance that need with continuing to provide our customers with the quality and levels of service they expect.

Having installed scheduling systems into around 200 customers (mainly within a specific part of the organisation), we have seen excellent improvements both in the efficiency of the department but also in the levels of service that are achievable.

It has taken many years to break down the cultural issues within organisations to be able to achieve this but scheduling systems are now seen as a de-facto technology to enable organisations to find the right balance of delivering excellent levels of service at reasonable cost.

It's then only a small step to think about moving this success into other areas of the business and not only repeating this process, but also moving it to a completely different level.

Being able to give an organisation complete visibility of all of its assets and moving towards having a joined-up scheduling solution, allowing them to share resources across services, arranging visits so that more than one task can be carried out at once, and having the technology available to push these services out to customers across a variety of channels including self-service.

The benefits start to accrue very quickly; we can actually begin to provide these much needed services without increasing costs and deliver more within the current landscape's restrictions.

Corporate scheduling, and not just booking, is a step we should all be thinking about, allowing us to schedule both complex tasks and simple tasks within one solution.

Nick Shipton
Sales executive, Xmbrace

Digital inclusion and transient tenants

Sir – When it comes to internet provision for tenants, housing providers need to think carefully about resident tendencies.

Many tenants are transient and this is likely to intensify following the conclusion of the 'homes for life' initiative. Tying tenants down to fixed, minimum-term broadband and phone line contracts is inefficient and makes little sense economically.

Pay-as-you-go schemes are one option. The complexity, however, to deliver such a service is still a challenge that cannot be addressed through a 'one solution fits all' approach.

However, although it is more expensive in the short term to setup, pay-as-you-go, if done correctly, could eliminate the need for a long-term commitment, and would be cheaper for tenants than traditional broadband and landline contracts. Furthermore, housing providers could provide free access to key resources, such as government websites and services, the sites used to pay rent or the local credit unions. Then, any leisure use could be charged at a subsidised rate in a similar way – albeit cheaper – in which services like BT Openzone operate.

Internet access needs to be both flexible and cost-effective, so housing associations should ensure that long-term contracts tick these two boxes but in many cases, they won't fit the bill.

Andrew Henderson
Managing director, Lanway

Windows' shelf life

Sir – I was at Waterstons' Windows 8 preview last year and was fascinated to see what a huge improvement it is from the XP platform (yes, some of us have resisted Vista and Windows 7). For those of us wedded to the Microsoft environment, Windows 8 is a real breakthrough in terms of transcending the world of mobile, tablet and PC connectivity we now live in. Microsoft should be congratulated.

After the preview (the presentation of which was a marvel in its own right), I was convinced that it is time to move on from XP. My only concern, and I doubt that I'm alone in this, is the shelf life of Windows 8. The reason we have stayed with XP for so long is that it was an excellent, versatile platform which was supported (well, patched) throughout its long life. Changing corporate operating systems is a hideously expensive affair which is why we were resistant to moving with Microsoft at each and every one of their whims in the recent past. It is also why I hope that Windows 8 will have as long a shelf life as XP, although something in me tells me 'I should be so lucky'.

Harneck Chilemba
Finance director, Tower Hamlets Community Housing

The IT strategy misconception

Sir – For any organisation looking at their IT strategy, hoping for a supplier to wave a magic wand and deliver a ready-made solution without time and effort being spent by the organisation themselves may be a nice fantasy, but unfortunately that's not reality. To develop and implement an effective IT strategy takes commitment, communication, expertise and collaboration between the IT supplier of choice and in-house staff with the knowledge of local issues. This partnership approach is more likely to deliver change which works effectively for the business.

The possibility of buying an 'off the shelf' strategy can be a common misconception. The key to developing a comprehensive strategy is found by taking a step back to identify what the organisational goals are, to check what gaps there are in IT services preventing the delivery of these goals and agree how to best fill them. Added to the mix will be a view of the market to assess what wider issues can influence your strategy. This work may be delivered through your IT partner, your in-house resource or, more likely, a combination of both. There will be some elements where those who know your business best can deliver and advise on exactly what is appropriate, and some instances where those with a wider view of the industry can bring a new perspective to the mix and promote alternative thinking.

In developing any IT strategy, a combination of the right set of skills is the key to success. An organisation's dependence on IT services continues to grow and the responsibility for the development of those services is therefore increasingly unlikely to be planned by one single party alone. Choosing the right balance between local and industry-wide expertise will ensure you have an IT strategy with the right focus to deliver success.

Tim Cowland
Senior consultant, Sovereign Business Integration Group

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