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TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH
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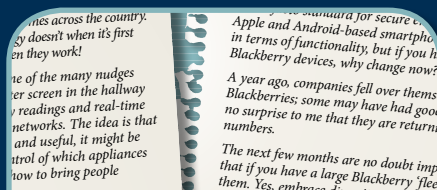
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Whither universal credit?

There is a strong focus in this issue on universal credit and welfare reform – not surprising when, at the time of writing, we're only six weeks away from the first Pathfinder trials in Manchester and around Cheshire, although the full roll-out isn't expected to be completed until 2017, according to the DWP.

However, little news is forthcoming from the DWP or its five main contractors working on universal credit (Accenture, BT, Capgemini, IBM and HP) and the project is now on its third CIO within a year. Furthermore, there have been reports that the DWP had asked its contractors to suspend work on the project; while this was denied by the government, the Prime Minister's spokesman was recently unable to confirm that the project would be delivered on time and on budget.

Computerworld UK has reported that when the Pathfinder trials start at the end of April, most of the benefit calculations will be done manually using spreadsheets and that the only part of the final £500 million system that will be used will be to book appointments at job centres.

Referring to the implementation of the universal credit systems, a spokesman for the analyst company Ovum recently said, "Everyone knows the project is in difficulties. They should do less rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic and be more honest about what the difficulties are and how they intend to move the project forward."

Interview with Sir Clive Woodward OBE

We were able to catch up with Sir Clive Woodward OBE, World Cup Winner and Team GB's Director of Sport for the London Olympics, during our annual conference.

His keynote presentation proved inspirational, explaining how great teams are made of great individuals and how to build on this. Our exclusive interview with him is available online so we can share with you Sir Clive's insight into the importance of IT in both sport and in business. In the words of Sir Clive, 'whoever wins in IT tends to win in business'.

Even if you're not a sports fan, the video is well worth watching: www.housing-technology.com/videos.

New event – Housing Reform 2013

Following the success and popularity of our series of Housing Technology conferences and occasional events at the BT Tower in London, we are launching a new one-day event covering the convergence of technology, universal credit and welfare reform, and digital inclusion. Provisionally titled 'Housing Reform 2013', we expect the event to take place in June in London (exact date and location to be confirmed.).

More information on Housing Reform 2013 will be available in April but in the mean time, if you would like to express an interest in speaking, sponsoring and/or attending the event, please email events@housing-technology.com.

FUTURE EVENTS

InMotion 2013

16 April 2013, Heritage Motor Centre, Warwickshire
www.xmbrace.com/inmotion2013

SharePoint & CRM for Housing –
Parabola Software & Microsoft

24 April 2013, Microsoft's offices, Reading
www.parabolasoft.co.uk

Virtualisation with Synapse360 & Trent and Dove Housing

25 April, Webinar
www.synapse360.com/events

Housing Reform 2013

June, London (date and location tbc)
www.housing-technology.com



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Universal credit – How many of your tenants are offline?

Chris Deery, Head of ICT, Solihull Community Housing

Like many housing providers, here at Solihull Community Housing we have been trying to understand the scale of the impact of universal credit. Because of the 'digital by default' nature of the new universal credit system, it is becoming increasingly important to understand what percentage of our tenants are digitally excluded.

In July 2012, we asked 100 involved tenants about their access to the internet. 53 per cent of the respondents said that they had broadband at home and 82 per cent said that they had used internet banking. At first glance, it seems that we can expect the

majority of tenants to be able to cope with the new universal credit system.

However as a corollary, these results also suggest that around 47 per cent of people who responded don't have easy access to broadband. The problem with these results is that we don't know how many of the people who responded were within working age. In December 2012, 87 people were asked about access to the internet as part of our mini-questionnaire, including capturing their age. The results were as follows:

Do you have access to the internet?	16-24 yrs	25-34 yrs	35-44 yrs	45-54 yrs	55-59 yrs	60-64 yrs	65-74 yrs	75-84 yrs	85+	GRAND TOTAL
Internet via mobile phone	2	3	4	1		1				11
No internet access		2	2	6	2	3	9	9	1	34
PC/broadband at home	4	9	4	7	4	4	2	1		35
Use internet cafe or library			3	2	2					7
GRAND TOTAL	6	14	13	16	8	8	11	10	1	87

As you can see from the above figures within the survey, we found that 19 people over the age of 65 did not have internet access and within this age group, only three people had broadband at home. This is a worrying result, but perhaps more worrying from a universal credit perspective was the fact that 12 people between the ages of 25 and 59 also didn't have access to the internet. This represents about 14 per cent of all our tenants or around 21 per cent of our working age tenants.

Of course, the number of tenants involved in these surveys is quite small and, although we have no reason to believe that this sample is not representative of the wider tenant population, we must accept that there is probably a margin of error in these results.

From a planning perspective we need to make some assumptions about the possible scale of the impact of universal credit. The results above suggest that a reasonable estimate is that around 20

per cent of working age tenants will struggle with the 'digital by default' nature of universal credit.

Of course, the exact numbers will depend on the age profile of your tenants, and housing providers with large proportions of their stock in rural areas may find their percentages are even higher. But IT managers need to begin the process of getting their organisations to focus on this 20 per cent and thinking about the extra support these people will need when they have to manage all of their interactions with the DWP using the internet.

We need to identify exactly who the 20 per cent are and, just as importantly, think about how we can free-up the resources within our own organisation to enable us to provide them with the support they will be likely to need.

Chris Deery is head of ICT at Solihull Community Housing.

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Predicting and measuring rent arrears

Derek Steele, Managing Director, Mobyssoft

Housing Technology asked Derek Steele, managing director of Mobyssoft, for his perspective on the rent market, how income management teams are 'getting smart', the potential impact of welfare reforms and how they can be mitigated.

After nine years of working with housing providers to optimise efficiency and improve business practices, it's difficult to hear so many voices in the market now talking about 'survival'.

We're only too aware of the imminent seismic changes to the welfare system – changes that have put the once secure financial model under threat. Every day I hear the same story: "we're going to have to do more with less in order to maintain current revenue levels"; in effect, trying to run harder into an ever-strengthening headwind.

The new vulnerability of income throws up the unsettling prospect of housing providers defaulting on loan covenants or losing safe credit status, and casts further doubt on the sector's ability to provide desperately-needed new housing in future.

Astonishingly, figures from a recent Ipsos Mori and Cambridge University study show that a sizeable proportion of housing providers (16 per cent) are expecting little or no effects from the switch to the direct payment of housing benefit.

Number crunching

As a relentless 'number cruncher', I'm in a unique position to analyse the efficiency and vulnerability of rent collection across a large section of the social housing market. And the numbers are worrying.

Mobyssoft currently provides digital rent solutions to 50 registered providers, administering 381,000 rent accounts per week, and is responsible for recouping a total annual rent charge of over £1.6 billion.

Around half of the total rent revenue from these households is currently guaranteed in the form of housing benefit paid directly to the landlord. Therefore, even allowing for the most optimistic interpretation, the

implementation of housing benefit paid direct to tenants suddenly puts half of that total rent income at risk.

Every week, Mobyssoft clients register over £65 million in arrears through industry-standard housing management systems. Using RentSense, which analyses trends in past payment patterns to predict tenant account activity and identify where contact is likely to yield a result, that figure is reduced to £13 million of unpaid revenue to be pursued each week. That equates to approximately 125,000 tenants each week who are at genuine risk of falling into further arrears, without timely intervention and assistance.

This process of streamlining data to provide a more targeted, manageable workflow will prove invaluable as payment processes are adapted for universal credit.

However, we have recognised that larger organisations which receive housing benefit payments through a number of local authorities are in a better position to deal with the challenges posed by universal credit.

Variable payment schedules

Local authorities pay housing benefit on different schedules, meaning that larger organisations already have experience of managing a plethora of payment processes at different times in the rental month.

On the other hand, ALMOs who are accustomed to receiving housing benefit through just one channel, sometimes in advance, are most at risk from receipt of new payments monthly in arrears, scheduled around personal tenant information such as an individual's National Insurance number.

Speaking to the market at large, the more conservative estimates suggest that the introduction of universal credit will see an increase of 50-100 per cent in rent arrears cases. There is a natural assumption that approximately 100 per cent more unmanaged accounts, resulting from the change in housing benefit payments, will lead to a doubling of the workload.

However this doesn't take into account the ability of those new rent payers to meet their financial commitments.

In fact, analysing the data processed by us every week, it's hard to see a projection for required capacity any lower than 100 per cent. This means that across all customers, there could be as many as 250,000 arrears cases, equating to millions of pounds in revenue at risk each week.

Increasing arrears

Initial reports from the ongoing Direct Payment Demonstration Project show arrears cases at participating organisations almost doubling, from around five per cent to eight per cent. But then again, these figures aren't a fair reflection of what to expect after the dawn of universal credit for a number of reasons.

The organisations involved have been able to choose which tenants are included in their sample, as well as the date that housing benefit is to be paid. Most importantly, the full effect of universal credit on tenant budgeting will not be known until all the changes to benefits and allowances are factored in (i.e. when it is already too late to act).

As more of the financial burden is passed to tenants, social landlords look set to become just another competitor for rent payers' money. To this end, many housing providers are moving tenants in receipt of housing benefit onto direct debits in order to protect their income. However, direct debits will still rely on money being available in a tenant's account at the time payment is due, otherwise banking fines will simply add to the individual's burden.

Extra staff

Other organisations will employ more income management staff in order to mitigate any projected increase in rent arrears, but where will the budget for extra staff come from if revenue is reduced at the rate of even conservative estimates? Housing providers will find themselves trying to reallocate budgets towards rent collection and arrears management just to maintain the status quo.

Predicting and measuring rent arrears with Spirit Data Capture & Motorola

Continued from the opposite page

It's encouraging that some organisations have been proactive and innovative in confronting the issue head on. Jo Noshouri, service improvement manager at Amicus Horizon explains, "We were acutely aware that, with sweeping welfare and benefit reforms imminent, the housing sector was becoming increasingly sensitive to the potential risk of increasing arrears and reduced revenue. As a result, housing associations and sector analysts were considering how best to minimise the risk. We need to do everything we can to help households cope with the changes. Increasing capacity through innovation is one way we can prepare."

Since tenants in receipt of full housing

benefit are often those that RSLs know least about because rent money has never passed through their hands in the past, there is clearly a communications challenge for housing providers to address in order to protect their income. However, the budget and resources required to run publicity campaigns and other essential awareness-raising activities can't simply be pulled out of thin air.

Henry Ford famously commented on the invention of the automobile, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses".

The momentous challenges on the housing industry's horizon call for innovative

and dynamic solutions, rather than the reinvention or expansion of established practises. Digital solutions are capable of unlocking significant capacity within income teams, making the management of arrears cases more efficient and less time-consuming.

Ultimately, however, innovation can only do so much. The biggest obstacle on the post-welfare reform horizon is understanding and appreciating the scale of the challenge.

Derek Steele is managing director of Mobyssoft.

To download the Ipsos Mori/Cambridge University report, visit www.ipsos-mori.com.

MidlandHR's 100% success during RTI pilot

HMRC has confirmed that MidlandHR's RTI software has been proven to be exceptionally reliable for submitting data using the new real time information (RTI) reporting method. 100 per cent of FPS (full payment submission) and EPS (employer payment submission) files were submitted to HMRC successfully. All but one of the EAS (employer alignment submission) files submitted were successful. The data covers submissions made since the RTI controlled go-live began in April 2012 to the end of January 2013.

Bob Newsome, strategic payroll consultant, MidlandHR, said, "We put significant effort into making sure that our RTI solution would be extremely reliable for our customers so it is pleasing to see that the software is working as expected. We built HMRC's RTI schema into our solution to ensure that inaccurate files cannot be created in order to avoid the subsequent inconvenience of inaccurate files being rejected."

"The one unsuccessful EAS submission was found to be down to user error. This highlights the need for housing providers to ensure they are properly prepared for their first RTI submission."



Liverpool Mutual prepares for UC with South View

Liverpool Mutual Homes is using a new welfare reform module for South View Solutions' mobile platform to help it prepare for the government's welfare reforms.

LMH has been managing the transition to the new welfare rules for many months, including the need to capture additional information on its tenants' economic, social and household circumstances that was not available in their current IT systems. LMH's neighbourhood housing officers are being used to collect the data from the residents on their patches using real-time data capture on mobile devices.

Sharon Griffiths, head of ICT, Liverpool Mutual Homes, said, "It was essential that housing officers could talk to tenants in their own homes and capture the required

data in a format that would be user friendly and would support follow-up business analysis enabling full data manipulation and assessment."

LMH has worked with South View Solutions for some time and by working with some of the LMH staff, South View Solutions was able to develop and deliver a welfare reform module for its mobile system in just a few weeks. The module is now being used by 10 housing officers and the data collected is being imported into LMH's Orchard housing management system and then reported on using LMH's business intelligence systems.

Ghassan Hassan, application support manager, Liverpool Mutual Homes, said, "LMH has completed just over 3,000 real-

time surveys. The results are currently subject to business analysis, the outcome of which will guide our welfare reform work programme."

Griffiths said, "The key factor in preparing for welfare reform from a housing provider's perspective is about having a comprehensive understanding of your tenants' economic, social and household circumstances. South View Solutions' welfare mobile system has allowed us to quickly gather the necessary information and store it in an updateable format that fully integrates with our existing housing management system and supports on-going business analysis."



IT budgets – Because you're worth it

Tony Smith, Independent Housing IT Consultant, Acutance Consulting

Should the IT team be 'in it together' too? Is looking inwards and having the ear of senior management one approach?

We have passed another Christmas and another autumn statement from George Osborne extending our period of austerity. The phrase 'we are all in it together' is banded about yet again, but in IT teams and departments across social housing and local authorities, I believe this is being taken just a bit too literally. In several local authorities in the past year, I have heard the same line – that IT needs to take the same cuts as other teams. I am now beginning to hear this more and more from housing providers as well, particularly with universal credit just down the line. IT budgets would therefore appear to be under increasing pressure.

This goes against the experience of implementing decent solutions and delivering measurable benefits. The crux of the matter is that it is rarely within the IT team that benefits actually accrue, such as efficiency gains, staff savings, reductions in paper usage or lower mileage claims. It is therefore essential that the IT team has a conduit to senior management and can communicate this state of affairs in the current economy. Directors and accountants can be polarised by the size of the annual cost racked up within the IT team and the IT infrastructure. From looking at the raw figures, it is impossible to determine whether a £20,000 annual saving in IT might mean the difference between a four-hour fix or a two-day fix. If that happens to be a major server with ten or more virtual machines on it, that might result in a hundred members of staff being disrupted for a couple of days and spending two more days catching up on un-entered data. The cost of that could easily be more than £20,000, plus the service issues that might also result.

'Silver bullet' applications

It's a sad fact that many 'silver bullet' applications sneak into organisations by the back door rather than through the one labelled 'IT Team'. If you have worked in that environment for more than a couple of years, you will start to smile now. You will have certainly been asked "Do we have a server to install this on?" or "How do we connect our new 'silver bullet' solution to the housing management system to duplicate some data?" Salespeople are very wily and know perfectly well that the easiest path to the sale is rarely through the IT team's

door. However, a lot of expenditure like this will go through a senior management team, thereby providing an opportunity for the senior manager in IT to head a lot of this off at the pass.

Many of these 'silver bullet' solutions can be accommodated perfectly well within most integrated housing management systems that you already have and pay an annual arm and a leg for. Now I am sure it may not be as sexy for the data-entry staff to use, but there is the prospect of coordinated reporting from fewer databases, better visibility in CRM and other benefits well beyond the team using it. Review every request for a new application and match off its functionality with what you already have; the gap analysis may identify more configuration, development or chargeable amendments, but you might find that you had a 'silver bullet' on your hands all along.

Internal IT reviews

While we are looking inwards, which is no bad thing anyway, a review of some key areas and how all that expensive software and technology is being used on the ground would be in order. If it's all ticking over nicely and no-one is complaining, it's certain to be all 'tickity-boo', isn't it? The reality is typically very different. In my experience, it is well worth using observers to watch staff perform their jobs; staff will openly reveal all the work-arounds they regularly use, those spreadsheets and other duplications. As one of many examples, iPads able to connect within a minute via Citrix and 3G with the main system were being used by staff during scheme visits merely as rests for paper notepads on which they made hand-written notes which would be keyed in by administrative staff sometime in the next few days. What message does that send to your tenant? Not "I care and I will make sure that we are on top of your issue or concern straight away". If this took more than a day, there's a good chance that a wrongly-addressed letter might be sent. How galling is that, when your housing officer was only in your kitchen talking about your name change two days ago?

Another example was the use of spreadsheets to monitor case-based activities instead of an existing integrated case management module as it was "too clunky". The fact that front-office staff using CRM were blind to ASB and complaint cases caused frustration for them and residents alike.

We haven't even touched on reporting either. Excel is undoubtedly one of the best applications ever written, but in general where you find spreadsheets on your network, you will find waste and duplication too. While users will seemingly fight to the death to keep their spreadsheets, that information should only be in the main integrated system, in as few places as possible. Eliminating spreadsheets reduces mistakes (wrong letters sent out to deceased tenants, etc), focuses use and ownership on the main systems and then incentivises lead users to drive these forward and the relationships with your suppliers. This can be through user groups or via bespoke development that can possibly be shared with other organisations with similar needs.

Supplier user groups

I am always disheartened when IT staff tell me that they no longer attend their suppliers' user groups. The common refrain is that they went in the past but could see little progress so they stopped attending. Surely that just makes it worse? When the majority of users attend user groups and other similar events, change does happen as suppliers can then recognise the depth of feeling and before long they have to act on it. If more than 70 per cent of a supplier's customers are knocking on their door with similar gripes or concerns, most decent suppliers will be accommodating – they have to be.

In summary, if I were a senior IT executive, in the current economy I would be paying attention to some of the following:

- Ensure that IT is properly represented on your organisation's senior management team. As the Americans say "grow some" to fight for and articulate the wider benefits that justify increased IT expenditure.
- Look inwards to further sweat the expensive applications you already have. Put 'spreadsheets beyond use'. Encourage or force members of staff to use existing integrated functionality which in turn benefits the wider organisation.
- Get someone to examine what end-users really do to complete their jobs every day, and target training and other programmes as remedies.
- Start an 'Arab Spring' and make your voice heard at your suppliers' user groups. Spread the word to others and leverage better value from your core IT application investments and suppliers.

Tony Smith is an independent housing IT consultant at Acutance Consulting.



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Universal credit & welfare reform – How we are evolving...

Hannah Elford, Design & Communications Manager & Thurle Phillips, Applications Manager, Paragon Community Housing Group

Paragon, like most other housing providers, is only too aware of the impact of Welfare Reform on our business. It is now more important than ever for our IT teams to work closely, not only with front-line staff, but also with senior management to streamline technology or processes – but in an ideal situation, both.

We have to be realistic about the limitations of our existing software and hardware compared with any proposed new software in terms of its ability to deliver, how it integrates with our existing housing management systems and also the ever-present 'vision for the future'.

People in the housing sector must be wondering whether constant long-term investment in software that claims to adapt as needs change has really done that, or whether their pre-conceived notion of achieving 'value for money' in the long run was unrealistic.

Perhaps IT teams are starting to visualise how they can support their organisations with smart thinking, shared knowledge, application infrastructure and an aptitude for being agile, rather than an over-reliance on maintaining IT systems, hardware and software.

While the impact of universal credit and welfare reform is enough to shock most housing providers into action, it also represents a unique opportunity for in-house IT specialists or external consultants to support the variety of services within the housing sector. At a time when the trust between housing provider and tenant is so crucial, support and assurance from IT is vital.

In light of these reforms, how is Paragon doing to gear up for the changes and how is our IT team involved with that? To that end, we're focusing on strong communications, new hardware, giving choice and flexibility in rent payment options and training for residents.

Strong communications

Paragon's IT team has worked closely with the design and communications team to ensure that we are communicating effectively with residents. We have begun working collaboratively to redesign our rent statements and rent arrears letters. We are encouraging more of our residents to sign-up to email communications and our income teams are using SMS texting to help with arrears, supported by IT.

The IT team is helping our business users to drill down into the data we hold on our

residents and to analyse our stock in the hope of targeting communications better. We are looking at how we can streamline and automate reporting to make the process more effective.

We are building a new website with a strong focus on user experience and user testing prior to the launch so we can really understand how our residents want to navigate around the site. As the trend towards small screens and mobiles continues, with the majority of sites seeing at least 15 per cent of traffic on mobile and tablet devices, we have decided to invest in a responsive design from the initial build phase; a responsive design allows a website to re-size to fit the screen being used by the resident. Websites used to be about posting information but we now understand that we have to go further and make our new site as interactive and user-friendly as possible.

We are working very closely with the web developers to help them understand what we want to achieve, how we work in-house and what we want to be able to change ourselves in future in the back-end content management system.

Hardware and infrastructure

So we've thought about how people will engage with Paragon from smartphones, tablets and TVs, but we are also looking at how we can equip our housing teams so that they can work remotely, visit residents, record data and take rent payments with tablets and handheld devices. We appreciate the need to give our staff the best technology we can, but this will naturally be constrained by the budget. The IT team is developing a bring your own device (BYOD) so that our end-users can use their own technology to enhance their workflow, and we are improving our server environment to accommodate more mobile devices.

We are also simplifying our IT infrastructure by moving some of our remaining physical servers to virtual machines on the basis that applications run better when virtualised and this is especially true for business-critical applications. Migrating physical servers over to virtual machines and consolidating them onto far fewer physical servers means lower monthly power and cooling costs in the datacentre, plus most virtualisation platforms now offer a number of advanced features not found on physical servers, which helps with business continuity and increased uptime.

Choice & flexibility in payment options

Towards the end of last year we decided to review our payment options. We now use Allpay in order to offer our residents a direct debit service on any day of the month, to reflect the fact that universal credit can be paid to recipients on any day of the month. This service has the potential to reduce rent arrears because direct debits can be aligned to the day when a resident receives their universal credit. Starting this process now has allowed us to prepare for the changes and embed the new system into our internal processes. As the service is largely managed externally, this has meant that our IT and finance teams can shift their focus to other projects. Our hope is that our residents will come to recognise the Allpay brand as being associated with payments by phone, app, Post Office and of course, direct debits.

Training for residents

In our view, welfare reform and digital inclusion go hand in hand. We are looking into what kind of IT training would help our residents and in turn help us, including the possibility of working with local organisations to pool resources.

There is a strong need to involve our design and communications team to encourage the take-up of training courses, combined with consideration of how and where, having completed the training, residents will be able to access computers and the internet. We are therefore working closely with the resident involvement teams to map out potential community projects and computer hubs.

It will be interesting to see how we can help our residents apply for universal credit online, particularly as there is much speculation about how long it takes to complete an online form, even for an experienced user.

The impact of welfare reform and universal credit on IT teams is colossal. Without their strong support, engagement and delivery, housing providers could struggle with spiralling arrears and poor resident understanding. However this is also a good time to execute great transformation, evolution and adaptability within IT.

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

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Buying 'jam jar' banking technology

David Hall, Senior Associate, Anthony Collins Solicitors

Registered providers needn't reinvent the wheel. There are a number of products and services already on the market that can help tenants to budget and promote rents getting paid on time. Housing Technology asked David Hall, a senior associate at Anthony Collins Solicitors, to examine what to ask for from a financial services provider tender or contract.

As is widely known, although housing benefit is currently paid directly to housing providers by the local authority to cover rent payments, benefits-supported tenants will soon be expected to manage their own income and expenditure through universal credit. Tenants will receive a single, monthly benefits payment and will have to pay rent and their other bills from it.

Some benefits-supported tenants may find changes to their financial routine particularly difficult to manage. Those with debt problems, poor numeracy skills, learning difficulties, older people or substance abusers may not be ready to budget for themselves when the scheme comes into effect, resulting in late or non-payments of rent as well as other important bills.

'Jam jar' accounts

To minimise the chance of rents not being paid, many housing providers are working with financial services providers (FSP) to give tenants access to 'jam jar' bank accounts. These are designed to be very easy to use for people who have never used a bank account, and allow tenants to set up direct debits and standing orders for regular outgoings while splitting the remaining funds between pots or jam jars.

It is in the best interest of the housing provider to encourage tenants to set up jam jar accounts to help ensure that rent is paid on time. When looking for an FSP partner, there are a number of criteria to look for to ensure that the product chosen for tenants' use benefits all parties.

First, it is important to find a product that tenants will value and be happy to use. Ease of use is one of the first things to examine. While a high percentage of users

in younger age groups will have access to the internet and feel comfortable using this channel to manage their finances, this will not apply to all tenants. Housing providers should look for an FSP that also offers telephone and SMS banking and support too. Providing multiple access points promotes active financial management by making tenants' funds more visible.

The set up of the account is also particularly important. Housing providers should make sure that the account is flexible and can include enough jam jars to support a wide range of lifestyles and habits of bill paying, necessary purchases and savings. Basic accounts are structured with a minimum of two pots covering bills and spending.

Additional functions to encourage saving can be built into the account where any money left in the 'spending' jar is automatically swept into a savings pot at the end of the month. Users should be able to opt in to this type of service, but housing providers should use the procurement process to investigate the options available in order to get the most desirable products and get buy-in from tenants. Consider doing some testing, drawing on your existing tenant engagement arrangements, and maybe even build that into your tendering requirements.

Incentives for tenants

Your interest in how much tenants like the jam jar facilities that you offer them may depend on your level of commitment to a financial inclusion strategy. Whatever your corporate views on that matter, and even if you find a jam jar account that is liked by tenants, you will probably need to offer incentives to get the least interested tenants on board. You should also give at least equal priority to your business objective; you need jam jar accounts so that the rent gets paid (many FSPs have yet to latch on to this!).

There are some FSPs and jam jar solutions that make rent payment a priority but not all FSPs will use software that does this automatically, so housing providers should emphasise this from the start. The ability

to align rent payment dates with universal credit payment dates is also essential to limit your exposure to arrears. You want the rent out and in your account as soon as it hits your tenant's account. If your tenant chooses to pay via direct debit, then your account in turn must be flexible enough to allow for collection on any day of the month.

Multiple payments channels

If the tenant prefers to pay their rent at the Post Office (or using other payment methods such as PayPoint), the use of a prepaid card is necessary. Prepaid jam jar account swipe cards work like traditional debit cards but they only allow the user to spend what has been loaded on to them, helping to curb accidental overspending. Housing providers should examine how the cards can be credited and if there are measures in place to prevent funds being loaded and spent elsewhere. You might need a jam jar or other bank account in place first before your tenant can use prepaid cards; it might begin to look like a rather complicated and costly solution when you really evaluate it.

Many FSPs will want the housing provider to get involved with advertising and promoting the account (and perhaps lending) to tenants, along with account set-up, tenant support and training on how to use the account and administration. Make sure you understand what you are agreeing to and the risks and liabilities involved; the financial services jungle is heavily regulated, and you may need to get legal advice at an early stage.

Banking fees

Most FSPs are imposing a per-account monthly fee payable by the housing provider. You should expect the price to drop if you will be referring a large number of tenants to the FSP, or if the FSP is already a high-volume provider. Some FSPs will impose charges on the tenant for withdrawals or deposits; this should also yield a drop in the monthly fee payable by the housing provider. FSPs geared up to offer or promote lending to their account holders should be able

Buying 'jam jar' banking technology with Spirit Data Capture & Motorola

Continued from the opposite page

to offer further discounts to the housing provider and on transaction charges, as the profit from lending is higher than from operating deposit accounts. The leading FSPs will charge housing providers less than £5 per account, but don't be deterred from pushing for something under £3 per account, with no transaction charges.

We would recommend that you run a competitive tender to make your final selection of FSP and jam jar products so you can push them on these features and also on price.

Finally, the really legal bit. The FSP should be authorised and regulated by the

relevant financial services regulators. At the moment, it is the Financial Services Authority (FSA) and the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) for consumer credit. Later this year the FSA will get chopped up and will become the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority. Any contract or arrangement that you form with an FSP, including any adverts or promotions made to tenants, will have regulatory implications, and the deal may amount to being a regulated contract. Housing providers can rely on some exemptions but they are narrow and fiddly, and if you get it wrong you are likely to be committing criminal offences.

The FSA, and its successor, and the OFT are powerful, aggressive regulators. Get it right first time and take advice. Ideally, select a legal partner before you do any soft market testing. There are a number of products already available and it is not necessary to start from scratch. The most important thing to ascertain is that tenants are presented with a product they want, and that this ultimately ensures that rents are paid.

David Hall is a senior associate at Anthony Collins Solicitors.

PfH announces telecoms procurement winners

Procurement for Housing has launched a new telecommunications agreement covering the procurement of calls, lines, data and unified communications as well as mobile communications, training and consultancy. The EU-compliant framework offers housing providers three lots which can be used at the same time or individually for both new and existing contracts.

Six telecom providers will supply services through the framework for four years – Britannic Technologies, ConvergeOne, Daisy Communications, Gamma Network Solutions, Social Telecoms and Udata Infrastructure.

The calls, lines, data and unified communications lot covers voice services such as traditional calls and lines, IP telephony, networking for voice, video and data applications, unified communications, datacentre services and hardware. The mobile communications lot includes mobile voice and data, mobile broadband and associated hardware such as smartphones and tablets. The telecommunications consultancy lot covers systems design, data analysis, strategy development, funding options, regulatory compliance, digital inclusion, and staff and tenant training.

Andrew Carlin, commercial director, Procurement for Housing, said, "We set up a telecoms product group including ten housing providers to ensure this agreement covers the latest technology and meets the sector's requirements.

With national supplier coverage, wide choice and opportunity for further savings through mini-competitions, this deal will generate significant efficiencies for housing providers."

Britannic Technologies was awarded contracts for calls, lines, data and unified communications and for telecommunications consultancy services, achieving the top ranking for technical provision in both lots.

Commenting on Britannic's PfH performance, Saul Stevens, IT director, Family Mosaic, said, "All suppliers give a good service these days, but finding a supplier who really understands our business and has the strategic vision to work with us to support and develop a long term plan is not so easy. From day one Britannic was 100 per cent engaged from engineering, account management and senior management."

Simon Penaluna, head of ICT, Cheshire Peaks and Plains Housing Trust, added, "Since 2006, Cheshire Peaks & Plains Housing Trust has worked with Britannic Technologies updating and replacing the telecoms infrastructure throughout the company. Britannic has provided an end-to-end solution that has helped us in improving customer care and access to our services."

ConvergeOne was awarded contracts for all three lots, including top ranking for the telecommunications consultancy lot.

Tony Beddows, commercial director, ConvergeOne, said, "Combining our expertise in the housing sector with a strong client services team and excellent technical capability, ConvergeOne can provide the highest quality of service delivery expected by PfH members."

Social Telecoms, which reinvests its profits in the communities it serves by offering low-cost ways to access the internet for social housing tenants, was awarded a contract for the supply of calls, lines, data and unified communications.

John Clarke, managing director, Social Telecoms, said, "It's a remarkable achievement for a small company like us to win one of the biggest housing framework agreements and we have done it in the face of competition from some of the biggest operators. And although we won on quality and price, the housing providers we deal with attach equal importance to the social value built in to our contracts.

"With the introduction of universal credit, and the migration of benefits services to online portals, it's vital that tenants can access the internet for the most basic transactions such as paying their rent. Housing providers need to ensure they address this issue for the long-term sustainability of their business and to ensure their tenants aren't excluded economically and socially."



Business alignment and performance

Pete Mylett, CEO, BluTek



Sir Clive Woodward OBE, Rugby World Cup Winner and Team GB's Director of Sport for the London Olympics, gave the keynote address at this year's Housing Technology conference last month. He revolutionised the way rugby was coached and played, and he is famous for his grave attention to detail and for planning the personal development of individuals within a team.

Another coach famous for attention to detail and personal development is David Brailsford, director of performance for the Great Britain cycling team. Remember the iconic photo of the Team GB cycling team where the gap between the rear wheel of one rider and the front wheel of the next is perfectly uniform? It is as if they were arranged by hand – a team in perfect harmony.

Brailsford is very keen on statistics and data relating to performance. In turn, he is an admirer of the achievement of Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. Beane is famous for recognising that the way baseball players were assessed by everyone in the game, from coaches, managers and other players down to the fans and media, was flawed because they were based on outdated indicators that were a century old. Beane was brave enough to take a fresh look and drew up new criteria to measure individual performance. His new approach enabled Oakland Athletics, one of the

smaller teams in US baseball, to compete with the big-spending teams.

What can we learn from the world's best performance coaches that we may apply to business and indeed to technology investment? Well, there are two very important lessons in my view.

First, individuals must be assessed carefully and attention paid to their personal development as well as their role in their team. If you are happy with being adequate or mediocre, then simply hire people using job descriptions and interviews, place them in post and then hope for the best.

However, if you want your team to outperform in your sector, then work at making that team better than the sum of the individuals within it. Woodward realised this and created a detailed development programme for each member of the 2003 England rugby team. The approach he adopted meant carefully assessing and developing each individual in the context of his impact on the entire team's performance and the achievement of the long-term goal to win the Rugby World Cup.

Don't your business goals warrant that approach? Wouldn't that mean that technology would be seen immediately as just a tool for the team and not as the panacea that it is too often positioned as?

When it comes to the technology tools at the disposal of the team, don't just think

that buying the 'best IT system' (or worse still, the 'most advanced IT system') will be the answer. All too often one sees elaborate 'invitations to tender' that measure all sorts of fancy things about a supplier, or about a technology, completely missing the point that many of these things will at best only have a slight impact on the performance of your team and the achievement of your business goals. Make sure you find out what your team really needs to achieve your business goals rather than selecting a fancy technology in the hope that it will in some mysterious way have a bearing on your team's performance and the eventual achievement of your business goals.

You may recall the French cycling team complaining that the Team GB cycling team had an unfair advantage because they had 'magic wheels'. It turns out that this was based on a quip by Brailsford about the 'roundness' of his team's wheels. This does not mean that technology is not relevant – we have all seen how 10ths of seconds have been shaved off world records in almost every sport as a result of technical advances. But it is true that no successful coach has spent more time on technology than they did on people!

Now, ask yourself a question. How did you spend your time and money when you last selected and implemented an IT system that was intended to improve your business performance? Is the following table a true reflection of what happened?

90 per cent of time & money	10 per cent of time & money
User and departmental requirements	Business process analysis and redesign
Supplier vetting and selection	Staff skills and personal development
System vetting and selection	Team analysis and performance metrics

The second lesson from these great performance coaches is that there is no substitute for attention to detail. In a business context, that means getting real and accurate data on every part of your team's performance, each individual's performance and your technology's performance. The hard part is not just getting the data, but also developing metrics or KPIs that bring to life the meaning of that performance and its successes or failures.

This is what Brailsford demonstrated through his obsession with the 'cycling quotient' data, so you need to be ruthless in examining the basis for your business decisions. For example, if you plan to invest in another property marketing campaign to sell your developments, do you really know the answer to the following questions:

- What marketing techniques are most likely to work in this context?
- Who in your team is best suited to working on initial follow-up?

- Is someone in the team better at closing?
- Of the sales that closed successfully – why was that so?

There is lots of data to collect and there are many questions that need examining. Together they provide a picture that should influence your business decisions. Going back to the sales example above, is the old-fashioned database or CRM system you installed capable of helping you to get the data and answer those questions?

Business alignment and performance

Continued from the opposite page

In general, you might say there are five common fallacies that Woodward, Brailsford and Beane spotted and did not agree with:

1. The majority of the sector does it this way and they can't all be wrong;
2. This is the accepted way you do it so I will follow suit;
3. Equipment (i.e. IT) is important so if I have a lot of it that will improve performance;
4. Individuals (i.e. my staff) all have different potentials so I cannot make them perform above those potentials;
5. I have hired the best staff I can afford

and they will instinctively know how to work as a team and produce the results I want.

It is up to business managers and business-oriented CIOs to look carefully at the performance and capabilities of their staff and their cohesion as a team. This should be done before staff are asked to select any given computer system. The business must have an ambition to only invest in technology and systems that are themselves performance-oriented. These are systems that are designed from the outset to automatically collect data on

staff and task performance, and which are capable of reporting on KPIs and other user-definable metrics. Only then will business performance be monitored and improved upon systematically.

Finally, all technology investments must feature staff development and training as part of the plan and not as a chore that occurs after technology selection has been completed. It is the team that will achieve the business goal, not the technology.

Pete Mylett is CEO of BluTek.

Family Mosaic automates sales & marketing with BluTek

Family Mosaic is using BluTek's new BluBrik sales and marketing system to integrate its development activities with the rest of its systems. The new system is based on BluTek's WorkFlow Engine to ensure that all of the housing provider's business processes are automated and monitored in real time and that no follow-ups are late or sales opportunities missed.

The WorkFlow Engine has been paired with a dedicated sales and marketing database with links to online applications via Family Mosaic's website, to its housing management system, and to text and email channels with clients, suppliers and utilities.

BluTek and Family Mosaic worked together to map the workflows needed for effective sales and marketing campaigns, to follow up leads and to ensure that the entire sales

and marketing team is in touch with each other and with prospects and customers. Saul Stevens, IT director, Family Mosaic, said, "Automation like that offered by BluBrik takes the day-to-day problems out of our hands so that we can focus on the future of the business and the potential we have to grow. Development is a key strand of our business model, and having first-class technology from BluTek supporting our sales team is adding real value."

Component accounting on demand from Real Asset Management

Real Asset Management has just launched a subscription-based version of its component accounting system for SORP and IFRS compliance within smaller housing providers. RAM's Series4000 On-Demand is aimed primarily at housing providers still using spreadsheets or an older, inflexible asset module. The software is available via a monthly subscription to reduce capital expenditure.

Karen Conneely, group commercial manager, Real Asset Management, said, "Despite their smaller scale, many associations have reasonably high volumes of asset records to manage under component accounting. They often have very limited resources at their disposal to take on the vast amount of additional work that is generated by using either

spreadsheets or less feature-rich, legacy asset registers."

Series4000 On-Demand is available as either an on-premise system installed on a housing provider's local network or as a cloud computing-based system hosted by RAM.



CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

Spring online with Digital Unite

Digital Unite is running its twelfth annual 'Spring Online' campaign during April to help housing providers extend their plans for digital inclusion among tenants. In 2012, more than 2,000 Spring Online events helped 30,000 people to get online.

More than 100 housing providers took part in the 2012 campaign; the winner of the best event award was Halton Housing Trust, which involved pupils from local primary schools to show the 'grown ups' how to send emails to the Queen. Runners up

Home Group used the campaign to kick-start its digital inclusion work by running taster events for tenants across the country, while Wigan and Leigh Housing ran Spring Online sessions on a mobile bus parked at supermarkets, on local estates and in town centres.

Spring Online events are free to run and are supported by lots of ideas, advice and marketing materials at www.digitalunite.com/spring-online. In addition, Digital Unite has a

number of £100 grants to support housing providers' digital inclusion work, awarded on a first come, first served basis.

Michelle Phillips, customer involvement officer, Halton Housing Trust, said, "Getting involved with Spring Online has been great as it gives us a tangible hook for delivering our digital inclusion activities and because it's a national campaign, we receive lots of tips, advice and support to help with running our events."



Is your business social?

David Leach, Director of Technology & Transformation, Orbit Group

Is your organisation embracing digital service delivery and the benefits on offer from a business model that is open, transparent and collaborative? This article builds on my presentation at the Housing Technology 2013 conference in February, titled 'Social business: the role of technology as an enabler to drive business transformation', and looks at the IT team's role in the businesses of tomorrow and why learning from social media might help the housing sector deliver against some of the current challenges.

Wikipedia tells me that, "a business is an organisation involved in the trade of goods, services, or both to consumers." It also states, "businesses are predominant in capitalist economies, where most of them are privately owned and administered to earn profit to increase the wealth of their owners." The same site also tells me that social media "refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks."

Solving social issues

SocialBusiness.org says, "a social business is a company dedicated to solving a social issue. The company strives to make a profit, although all profits are re-invested to further the social benefit. By using business principles and strategies, it creates a sustainable business model to eradicate the social issue. Social issues are those that relate to poverty, health, education and human rights."

So, if we look at what a social business means in the digital sense, it should combine the ability to be commercially successful and collaborate internally and externally to co-create services that deliver some sort of social transformation. If we accept this is the case, then what is the role of the IT team?

Finding the right balance

My view is that a successful IT team should be focused on balancing the utility of

'keeping the lights on' with the innovation of thought-leadership and enabling business improvement through the effective application of technology. In practical terms, this means a focus on best-of-breed business applications, not IT infrastructure; it means an awareness of collaboration toolsets and an operating model that embeds business partnering at its core.

This outward focus is a change of emphasis for many traditional corporate IT teams whose focus is on delivering a highly-available IT infrastructure and, furthermore, the skills needed to be a 'trusted advisor' are very different from the traditional technology-based roles. Business analysis, relationship management, enterprise architecture and supplier management are all skills needed in a progressive IT team and, depending on your infrastructure or system delivery model, these may replace some of the more traditional roles.

Flexible and responsive

A digital business needs its IT team to be flexible and responsive to requirements. It needs a technical team who use their in-depth understanding of business and technology to enable change without using the challenges of information security, data protection or infrastructure complexity as blockers to innovation, which saps business confidence in the ability of the IT team. Yes, there are many legitimate hurdles to sharing data, cloud delivery and social media usage, but businesses want their IT teams to help overcome these challenges and help move the business forward. Without strong alignment, confidence and trust between the IT team and their stakeholders, a digital social business cannot be successful.

As stated earlier, a social business in the digital sense is one that collaborates and shares information across its people and networks, and I suggest that this business model has many benefits for the housing sector. Building communities, empowering residents and engaging in the co-creation

of services can all be enhanced with collaboration tools such as community micro-sites to share local knowledge, blogs that enable conversations rather than pushed out newsletters and online forums to engage in service feedback. The value for money and green agendas can be supported by embedding collaboration tools across organisations. Webinars, video conferencing, instant messaging and portals all help the effective sharing of information and have the potential to enable more efficient working. If deployed and used in the right way, social tools can drive employee engagement, giving employees a chance to join in a conversation about things that matter, work in a flexible manner and collaborate with colleagues.

But...

However, there is a big 'but...'. Digital exclusion is a huge obstacle in developing a successful digital social business. To be successful, employees, residents and stakeholders need to have the skills, equipment and access to consume and create digital content. Equally important is having the confidence and interest in participating in digital service delivery. Replacing paper with online forms and estate visits with blogs requires a significant change of culture and skills and is not appropriate for all. Nonetheless, its use in the right areas could create more capacity to help in those areas that need it most and start to empower people to really drive social transformation.

David Leach is director of technology and transformation at Orbit Group.



Thrive Homes wins top marks for customer service

Philip Day, Resources Director, Thrive Homes

Thrive Homes' resources director, Philip Day, explained to Housing Technology how the Hertfordshire-based housing provider has been awarded the Contact Centre Accreditation by customer service and contact centre experts Mpathy Plus.

Our head office in Watford has seven customer service staff dealing with around 1,200 phone calls per week, with 81 per cent of calls being answered within 20 seconds and 72 per cent of queries being resolved in the first call.

External specialists Mpathy Plus assessed the operational management process of the service centre to check it had the right infrastructure to help it deliver the best possible customer service. It awarded us the Contact Centre Accreditation after a

thorough review of our operations, including interviews with key staff and an assessment of our documents and processes against a set checklist.

Martin Jukes, the managing director of Mpathy Plus, said that Thrive Homes had the right system to deliver an excellent service as well as respond to change. He said, "Thrive came through the process with flying colours, and we are pleased to be able to give them the accreditation. It is a forward-looking company with everything in place so they can deliver a great service to people getting in touch with their contact centre."

Philip Day is the resources director for Thrive Homes.

SimplyUnite launches new housing app

SimplyUnite has launched a new app, Connect, to help housing providers deliver tenant services through their smartphones. Customised for each housing provider's brand, the app provides rapid access to a range of services from reporting faults and anti-social behaviour to rent reminders and job searches.

The Connect app lets housing providers turn individual modules within it on and off instantly to accommodate changing business needs, and making changes to the published data within the app is reported to be very easy.

Toby Hart, managing director, SimplyUnite,

said, "With 40 per cent of people having smartphones, it is common sense to make the most of these devices and make more of your transactions digital. Connect helps bring innovation to this ever-changing sector and we are excited about the positive effect it will bring to tenants' lives."

Civica & Liquid Voice partner for call recording and PCI compliance

Liquid Voice has formed a partnership with Civica to deliver highly-integrated call recording, PCI compliance and CTI solutions. Working with Civica's Connect division, the agreement extends Liquid Voice's capability to integrate its suite of computer telephony applications with the Civica Contact Manager software used by many housing providers and public sector organisations in the UK.

Liquid Voice is now the main call recording solution within the Civica Connect portfolio. The partnership will enable Civica to provide technical assistance to help customers specify, install and support solutions around call recording, computer telephony integration and interactive voice response systems. Liquid Voice will also provide Civica with new products, such as its new Speech Analytics managed service which uses software to analyse both natural speech and calling patterns to help organisations improve their call-handling strategies.

Chris Burden, managing director, Civica Connect, said, "Unified communications and call recording are major considerations for the housing sector as organisations strive towards improved customer service and PCI compliance. Our partnership with Liquid Voice allows us to create solutions that are reliable, fully featured and designed to work together as an integrated set of products with the full support of two very experienced service providers."

Liquid Voice will continue to develop its products to integrate with Civica Group's evolving application platforms to make sure customers can retain their investment in both unified communications and enterprise applications without complex support arrangements.

Chris Berry, co-founder and business development director, Liquid Voice, said, "Our agreement with Civica offers a significant benefit for both organisations and allows us to commit development resources to ensure that our applications are kept continually integrated. Looking ahead, it gives Civica customers an opportunity to enhance their unified communications platforms safe in the knowledge that key applications will continue to work together and subject matter experts will always be available to help with implementation, migration and support."



Smoke, mirrors and social media

Michelle Rodger, Director, Fat Frog Social Media

Adoption of social media communications among housing providers across the UK is poor. A poll carried out by the Guardian Social Enterprise Network revealed that 84 per cent think that an overly-cautious approach to social media is actually holding the sector back.

Don't get me wrong, that figure could so easily also relate to other sectors, but it's only a negative if housing providers fail to grasp that this is actually an opportunity. And therein lies the challenge; finding that opportunity carefully hidden among the smoke and mirrors that surround social media.

There are all sorts of excuses for failing to embrace social media; some blame the lack of internet access for tenants, some blame cost, there's the argument that management teams don't get it, and others say the current systems work and see no reason for change. But the real answer, the answer most people are reluctant to voice, is fear.

Pandora's Box

Organisations are scared to open the Pandora's Box that is social media out of fear that it's actually a can of worms, a seething mass of difficult to answer questions such as how do you control it? How do you prevent rogue updates on networking sites? Who should be responsible for posting status updates? What happens if someone makes a mistake? How do we make it work, within budget and within our grasp and understanding?

The smoke and mirrors surrounding social media are there simply to ensure continuous, well-paid work for the consultants who believe that they are experts in their field.

Here's the thing: social media is more 'Strictly Come Dancing' than 'Derren Brown'. Both have smoke and mirrors, but while only a few of us can hypnotise and do magic tricks, we can all wear sequins and hop from one foot to the other waving our 'jazz hands'.

If you are a housing provider, then there are certain things you need to do every day, every week and every month. And there's a process for doing everything, whether it's responding to tenant issues, updating residents with information, arranging appointments for viewings or booking contractors for repairs.

All of these activities can be carried out in the traditional way – all housing providers have databases, processes, regulations and red tape, they have to send letters, make phone calls, and have face-to-face meetings – but what if you could introduce social tools that would streamline those processes, improve communications, deliver quicker response times, all while reaching a wider audience and positioning your organisation as the hub of your community and your website as the first port of call for information?

Using social media can mean significant cost-efficiencies at the same time as reaching your tenants, residents, shareholders, the media and the wider community in a way that they respond to.

Getting started

The hardest part is actually taking the decision to get started. It's difficult due to the widespread lack of understanding at executive levels about the importance of social media and how it can be leveraged to maximise engagement and minimise costs. It's that fear thing I mentioned earlier.

Yes, there is naturally a need to be aware of defamatory comments and yes, there's always a concern about reduced productivity if staff are spending time on social sites, but this is simply down to creating an effective usage policy and training your teams. It's not difficult, and it's certainly not a barrier that can't be overcome.

The first step is simply to agree to take the first step. The executive team needs to not only understand the need to embrace social media, but they must also want to embrace social media.

If you want to harness the opportunities that social media can bring to your organisation, you need cultural change – from the top down, the bottom up and the outside in. Embracing social media should change how you run your organisation, and a token tick-box approach to the odd status update and tweet about welfare reform just won't cut it.

I suggest you should start by creating a comprehensive strategy that can be embedded in every department in your organisation, and commit to it. Make sure you include a social media usage policy and a social media training policy, and then start to use your imagination.

Creativity

Be creative in your approach and have some fun while you're at it. Imagine you have a limitless budget and can do anything you like. Then, when you've worked out all the amazing things you want to do, work out a way to do them within your budget.

With a bit of creative thinking, planning and communication, your website could become a community hub, the place where tenants, and others who live and work locally, turn to find out what's happening. It could be the first point of contact when there's a major issue, such as snow affecting schools and roads, or for people seeking help and advice about welfare reforms; finger-on-the-pulse information that not only reacts to tenant and community needs, but actually anticipates them and shares truly valuable information, links and answers.

Saving money

Better, smarter communications can also save costs. If you find out how your tenants want to receive their information, then you're minimising wasted resources. Start a dialogue on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or indeed your blog, ask questions, listen carefully, encourage honest and constructive feedback and then follow through, and use Facebook polls to involve tenants in decision-making processes.

And don't forget that young people, who are notoriously difficult to engage with,

Smoke, mirrors and social media

Continued from the opposite page

spend their lives on their smartphones so reach out to them where they hang out.

Social media isn't just about posting status updates; you should also consider apps. How about creating apps for reporting faults or requesting maintenance visits, allow tenants to pay rent, or use an app to spread the word about hard-to-let properties?

What about running social media events for your tenants in order to help them to understand how to use social media in a way that works for both you and them? So many ideas and so many opportunities; tailoring them to suit your community, your strategic goals, and your resources is the key thing.

Once you have defined your strategy and everybody is on board, trained, ready and

raring to go, the hard work starts.

Balancing empowerment to achieve your strategic goals with fair and reasonable monitoring, and a comprehensive understanding and overview of the legal requirements is never easy. But it is certainly manageable and indeed even enjoyable.

Michelle Rodger is a director of Fat Frog Social Media.

Montal helps Kirklees tenants get online

Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing has teamed up with Montal Computer Services to install a communal internet connection and terminal-based computer. With support from the Citizens Online 'Get IT Together' project and the council, they are running weekly training sessions to help residents learn the basics of using a computer and browsing the internet. Volunteer trainers are working with the residents to help them search for

their favourite hobby, save money on bills, keep in touch with friends, and access local information and services.

Helen O'Sullivan, project manager, Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing, said: "A significant number of our tenants, particularly the older ones, don't have access to a computer and have never used one. The government plans to require new benefit claims to be made online so

internet access in the future will not be a luxury, but a necessity."

Colin Sales, managing director, Montal Computer Services, said, "As one of our key Digital Inclusion partners, Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing has developed an excellent business case for the technology and we are delighted to work with them to deliver the end-to-end solution."

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Regenda promotes digital inclusion for older residents

Regenda Group is helping elderly residents in its sheltered schemes to learn how to access the web and email through a new online service which lets them use the internet safely from the comfort of their communal lounges.

Known as MyLinqs, the simple and secure web-based TV system has been specially developed for older people, allowing them to enjoy a variety of online services such

as keeping in touch with friends and family through free video and voice calls, sending and receiving text messages, watching TV clips of their favourite programmes and taking part in online quizzes. MyLinqs is being piloted in five of Regenda's independent living communities.

Andy Carberry, head of independent living, Regenda Group, said: "Our MyLinqs pilot

is part of our newly launched independent living programme, which is about supporting older people to maintain their daily routines and continue to enjoy their social interests, while we're here when needed. MyLinqs allows them to learn new skills which are important to retaining their independence."



Shared-services housing portal from Midland Heart and Abritas

Midland Heart has developed a new housing portal based on Abritas software for housing transfers and mutual exchanges. The Homes Direct portal is also available as a shared service for other housing providers.

In order to deal with the challenges posed by welfare reform, Midland Heart wanted to control who had access to its homes and be able to offer housing and tenure mobility to its customers through a single housing portal that integrated transfers and mutual exchanges.

Midland Heart selected Abritas to create the new Homes Direct housing portal, using the housing register, choice-based lettings, mutual exchange and enhanced housing options software.

In the first three months of launching Homes Direct, Midland Heart received 11,000 applications and over 300 customers have

since been housed through the system. The housing provider has saved over £100,000 by being in control of its own systems and allocations, and having greater control over short-lists has meant that re-let times have been reduced and void losses are £40,000 lower than expected. Bromford Living, Family Birmingham, Asra Housing Group and East Northamptonshire Council are now using the Homes Direct service.

David Taylor, deputy director for customers and communities, Midland Heart, said, "It has been a great help to have a single housing portal for all Midland Heart customers so that those people affected by welfare reform can register and start looking for alternative accommodation immediately."

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Are you ready for universal credit?



With universal credit high on everyone's agenda and as a continuation of the article in the September issue, Housing Technology interviewed representatives from MET, Montal Computer Services, Netcall, Online Centres Foundation, Paragon Community Housing Group and Sovereign Business Integration Group to find out their views on how welfare reform will affect housing providers.

Preparing for universal credit

With the introduction of universal credit getting closer and closer, the over-riding impression is that housing providers simply don't know what to expect. Will tenants beat expectations and embrace their new financial responsibilities or will arrears become even worse than predicted? Most housing providers seem to be concentrating, correctly in our view, on educating their tenants on how welfare reform will affect them, and in parallel preparing frontline staff and income teams for a deluge of enquiries from tenants during the introduction of universal credit.

Helen Milner, chief executive of the Online Centres Foundation, said, "The two main things to concentrate on are training for your staff and information for tenants. There is a great deal of uncertainty around welfare reform, so be clear about your timetable for change, who it affects, and what support you will be offering to tenants, while making sure that your frontline staff in particular are well trained and ready to answer questions from your tenants."



"The majority of tenants will feel more in control and this will lead to higher expectations of the services they receive from their housing provider"

Kelvin McGlynn, Business Development Manager, MET

Continuing the theme of preparing for the unexpected, Jacqui Stoggall, director of consultancy at Sovereign Business Integration Group, added, "As a minimum, housing providers should try to do as much tenant profiling as possible so that when universal credit comes into effect, they have a good understanding of their tenants' likely payment methods and indeed whether or not they have a bank account which can be used for direct debits. And from an internal perspective, housing providers should be talking to the suppliers



"The availability of historical data in a single view will become more important, fuelling a growing demand to move away from 'siloed' working practices"

Richard Farrell, Chief Technical Officer, Netcall

of their housing and financial management systems to find out how they expect to develop their income management functionality to manage universal credit and housing benefit during the transition period."

Financial concerns are a priority for all housing providers, with variable payment cycles, additional payment channels and an almost certain increase in arrears. Thurlie Phillips, applications manager at Paragon Community Housing Group, said, "We are preparing for an income shortfall and are providing multiple payment channels for tenants, such as daily direct debits, online, phone, app and at the Post Office. Paragon is also reviewing its arrears policy so that we will be able to deal with tenants quicker when they fall into arrears. We will also be offering training to tenants on how to get online, helping them to apply for universal credit online and assistance with budgeting."

As well as the uncertainty about arrears and payment methods, universal credit will result, at least at first, in a massive increase in tenant enquiries, whether over the phone, online, via email or social media. Richard Farrell, chief technical officer of Netcall, said, "The introduction of universal credit will increase the number of customer interactions for all housing providers. They should therefore establish some broad ideas about how they will cope with the increased workload, with the emphasis on using their existing housing and tenant data more intelligently to ensure more resolutions at the first point of contact."

Effects on business operations

Few people underestimate the scale of the changes resulting from welfare reform, but there are widely varying views on what is likely to happen in terms of arrears and tenant interactions with their housing providers. Colin Sales, managing director of Montal Computer Services, said, "Based on feedback from around 200 welfare advisors at a briefing on universal credit

in January 2013, fewer than 5 per cent of frontline staff feel positive about universal credit and the overwhelming majority saw it as the greatest challenge to welfare reform. Although most of them agreed that tenants should be expected to manage payment of their rent and that the single monthly payment would eventually streamline and improve the benefits system, 92 per cent expected that it would increase rent arrears."

Even though the universal credit pilot projects seem to suggest that fears of large scale arrears may be unfounded, Paragon's Phillips said, "84 per cent of housing providers expect arrears to increase by an average of 51 per cent. Not only will this have an immediate effect on income teams as more staff will need to cover smaller patches, but increased arrears may affect housing providers' credit rating [as recently reported by Moodys] and their ability to meet loan covenants and other financial obligations."



"In the long term, universal credit and welfare reform should help housing providers to become digital businesses"

Helen Milner, Chief Executive, Online Centres Foundation

Supporting the earlier comment about dealing with many more tenant enquiries, Kelvin McGlynn, business development manager at MET, said, "Universal credit will lead to more tenant interactions taking place outside normal business hours, so one of the key things housing providers should consider is how they service that requirement, whether it's via online services or extended hours for contact centre services, but that doesn't necessarily mean simply adding extra capacity to their frontline team; creative use of technology can take some of the burden away from staff."

Stoggall summed up Sovereign's view on the effect of universal credit on housing providers' business operations, saying, "It means less regular and reliable rental income, more resources needed for income management and financial uncertainty."

Impact on tenants

As mentioned earlier, a core part of most housing providers' strategies for dealing

Are you ready for universal credit?

Continued from previous page

with universal credit is educating and informing their tenants about the welfare changes and improving their online skills and knowledge, not only to help the tenants themselves, but also to reduce the housing providers' own headaches when universal credit comes into effect.

Montal's Sales said, "A Policis report found that 86 per cent of tenants believed 'strongly' that it was better for housing benefit to be paid direct to their housing providers, and DWP research found that 45 per cent of respondents said that they would need help to access and manage their benefits online. Furthermore, because social housing tenants in general tend to have a much smaller than average proportion of disposable income and often little or no savings, there is no cushion in the system; if a financial challenge comes, rent will often be diverted and then the arrears cycle begins."



"Many housing providers don't know their residents as well as they think they do which will make preparations difficult"

Colin Sales, Managing Director,
Montal Computer Services

Stoggall from Sovereign added, "Many tenants are going to have problems with budgeting and prioritising their finances, if only because they haven't had to do so before, and they will have to deal direct with their housing provider or local authority as well as the DWP."

However, if the government and housing providers want tenants to take more responsibility for budgeting and paying rent on time, tenants may expect that their financial responsibility should be accompanied by the right to better services. MET's McGlynn said, "While universal credit will be a concern for some tenants, and housing providers certainly need to support the most vulnerable, we expect that the majority of tenants will feel more in control and this will therefore lead to higher expectations of the services they receive from their housing provider."

IT implications

Welfare reform naturally affects housing providers' IT infrastructures, and in particular their housing and finance management systems. The key functionalities that they need are the ability to support multiple payment methods and the accounting tools to deal with rent payments that could arrive on any day of the month. Sovereign's Stoggall said, "The key things will be accommodating different payment cycles and mixed payment

channels to collect rent payments from a range of sources and at varying times, and developing the right functionality to support the early detection and collection of arrears."

Phillips from Paragon explained, "We need to make sure that our housing management system is configured to support us through this change because more information will need to be recorded and monitored. More of our staff will be given tablet devices for mobile working so that they can visit tenants more, and then record their findings and take payments; as part of this plan, we are considering the implementation of a 'bring your own device' policy so that our staff can use their own smartphones and tablets."

The adoption of new payment channels and having to deal with tenants' financial and banking details will mean the adoption of tighter data protection and security policies, including PCI compliance in the case of card payments over the phone. MET's McGlynn said, "With the deployment of more online services, housing providers will need to boost their information security and take data protection much more seriously. However, with the right approach, the impact on IT infrastructures does not have to be massive, and there are technology solutions and services in other industry sectors that can easily be adopted with minimal effort."

Farrell from Netcall added, "Our housing customers are expecting a significant increase in benefit and bedroom tax enquiries as well as an inevitable rise in revenue collection workload, so access to the right services must be easily achievable from the initial point of contact. The availability of historical data in a single view will become more important than ever, fuelling a growing demand to move away from 'siloed' working practices, better application integration and flexible arrangements for remote working."



"Universal credit means less regular and reliable rental income, more resources needed for income management and financial uncertainty"

Jacqui Stoggall, Director of Consultancy,
Sovereign Business Integration Group

Immediate and long-term effects

The phased transition from housing benefit to universal credit is probably easier than a 'big bang' approach. Sovereign's Stoggall said, "During the transition period, housing providers will have to manage rental income from both housing benefit and universal credit at the same time. Although this

phased approach will be complicated in the short term, it will give housing providers time to get to grips with universal credit and learn how to maximise their chances of securing rental income."

Referring to the earlier need to do as much preparation as possible, Montal's Sales said, "There is a real concern that many housing providers don't know their



"84% of housing providers expect arrears to increase by an average of 51%, and at the moment our fear is not knowing what will happen, apart from an increase in arrears"

Thurlie Phillips, Applications Manager,
Paragon Community Housing Group

residents as well as they perhaps think they do which will make preparations difficult. However, a recent policy briefing note suggests that the DWP is likely to take a strong line on direct payments to landlords. The DWP note says that the payment of universal credit 'should mimic work and receipt of a salary' and 'the government wishes to place responsibility for household budgeting with the household'."

The long-term effects of welfare reform may mean that many housing providers make considerable changes to how they operate, how they engage with their tenants, and how they develop additional revenue streams. Paragon's Phillips said, "At the moment, our fear is not knowing what will happen, apart from an increase in arrears. Although tenants will move to universal credit gradually, the way that housing providers are gearing up for the reforms indicates that there has already been a strong impact. Looking further ahead, we can envisage a completely different approach to tenants and the way we work. For example, housing providers may be forced to adopt stronger tactics for tackling arrears, and possibly develop more properties for shared ownership and private sale to recoup losses and generate alternative revenue streams."

Milner from the Online Centres Foundation said, "In the long term, universal credit and welfare reform should help housing providers to become digital businesses, as long as there is a strong safety net to help those tenants who need that bit more support to become 'digital citizens'."

Housing Technology would like to thank Richard Farrell (Netcall), Kelvin McGlynn (MET), Helen Milner (Online Centres Foundation), Thurlie Phillips (Paragon Community Housing Group), Colin Sales (Montal Computer Services), Jacqui Stoggall (Sovereign Business Integration Group) for contributing to this article.



BYOD and remote working at Halton Housing

Halton Housing Trust has transformed the working lives of its staff and improved productivity following its introduction of a 'bring your own device' strategy and remote working technologies.

The housing provider is now using a combination of Sunray, Citrix, Appsense, Air Watch and 1st Touch technologies, combined with widespread use of smartphones and tablet devices.

Lee Reeve, technical specialist, Halton Housing Trust, said, "I'm not aware of any other organisation of our size that uses so many technologies together to enable remote and flexible working. I'm particularly proud of our Sunray system which allows staff to work at any desk using a smartcard reader attached to the base of our phone system. The cards also open all of our doors and log people onto the phones."

Halton Housing started using Sunray technology three years ago at a cost of around £26,000, with others systems being added since to give greater freedom to staff. Out of Halton Housing's

280 staff, 75 of them now also have Citrix-enabled tablets so that they can work anywhere at any time.

Based on a recent internal survey, 82 per cent of staff now spend less time commuting to work and 96 per cent now work more productively since remote working was introduced three years ago. Office and transport costs have also been reduced owing to the use of hot-desking.

Sue Baxendale, director of human resources and operational development, Halton Housing Trust, said, "Remote and flexible working has made us more productive, reduced our staff sickness levels and given staff more control of their work-life balance. I thoroughly recommend that other housing providers embrace this new way of working."



Helena Partnerships is spending around £250,000 implementing Capita's TotalMobile system across its workforce. The project has just begun and is due to be completed by the end of 2013.

Helena spends £250k on mobile working with Capita

Capita's Ian Sinker (left) & Roger Birkinshaw (right) with Helena Partnerships' Dave Roberts

The Capita system will allow Helena's staff to access, capture and edit information saved to a single system at any time and from any location. Capita reported that TotalMobile works with almost any mobile device and uses an 'active middle office', an intelligent software layer which sits between the user's mobile device and back-office systems to allow information to be transferred instantly.

Colin Ward, customer and information director, Helena Partnerships, said, "The purchase of TotalMobile continues our relationship with Capita and adds a new dimension to the existing mobile platform we developed in 2006. TotalMobile is the perfect platform for our in-house CRM system and will let us share and update customer information using smart e-form technology."

1st Touch continues recruitment drive

Mobile system supplier 1st Touch continues to expand its workforce with the appointment of three more staff.

Chris Hall has been appointed as a senior account manager to work with 1st Touch's customers on their existing installations and identify new areas where mobile technology can deliver effective solutions.

Hall previously worked for Rosetta Stone where he was responsible for sales of the company's cloud-based language systems.

Within 1st Touch's support and development teams, James Davidson joins from Atkins Group as a .net developer and James Harding from EmailVision as a support engineer.

Xmbrace completes post-acquisition rebranding

Following the sale six months ago of the scheduling software provider Xmbrace to Kirona, Xmbrace has just relaunched itself with a new corporate identity, website and product names. Although the Xmbrace and Opti-Time brands were well-known in the housing and local government sectors, the company is now calling itself Xmbrace DRS (dynamic resource scheduler) as a single brand to improve clarity.

David Todd, partnerships director, Xmbrace, said, "Since we acquired the rights to Opti-Time in early 2012, significant product development work has added to the software's functionality, complemented further since the acquisition by Kirona. Xmbrace DRS now offers a fully-integrated option for mobile working and a wider range of capabilities around corporate scheduling and resource booking."

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Regenda spends £20,000 on mobile working with South View

South View Solutions has completed the first phase of a new mobile working project for M&Y, Regenda Group's in-house repairs and voids management contractor. Covering M&Y's gas servicing department, the project cost around £20,000 and took six months to complete.

The Android-based system has been integrated with Regenda's existing Orchard housing management system so that tasks such as job completions, labour costs and appointment cancellations can be done automatically without any manual intervention.

The application was configured for Regenda's needs with the addition of other improvements for M&Y, including notification of a previous 'no access' situation, emailing from within a job to notify the back office of potential further work requirements, capturing the data needed for a gas safety record, removing the

reliance on a separate gas servicing database, and the ability to report the status of a job event direct from Orchard Housing.

As South View Solutions' first customer for the Android version of its mobile system, M&Y's gas servicing team was able to suggest further enhancement to the system which will be included in future versions of the software.

Gas servicing jobs are all now scheduled in advance and uploaded to the operative's handheld device enabling them to complete the entire gas servicing process using a standard Android device.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT



Orbit boosts performance with Coactiva

Orbit Group is using Coactiva Aspiren's performance improvement and business intelligence software following a two-month implementation at the end of November 2012. The housing group is now self-sufficient in using the new Aspireview software to manage and monitor its corporate performance from an executive level down to operational levels.

Orbit is also using Coactiva's Aspireview IQ solution to report detailed transaction-level information such as property or tenancy data so that it can do more sophisticated analysis and predictive reporting. As part of the overall project, Orbit has integrated almost 20 back-office systems from across the group in order to have a full view of its performance.

Helen Burgoyne, head of excellence and innovation, Orbit Group, said, "We chose Coactiva's product because it allows us to display and use our data in a consistent and straightforward way. Recommendations from existing customers about how easy the product is to use also helped us make our decision, and our experience so far is certainly proving them right."

Rocket Software releases VfM software

Rocket Software, in conjunction with the housing consultancy PHHS, has just released new software specifically designed to help housing providers test, measure, manage and deliver on-going improvements in value for money (VfM) on their own terms. Rocket's new V3a software is a scorecard and analytical tool based on its CorVu system and lets organisations define and measure VfM using their own objectives, measures and targets instead of using a set of pre-defined, sector-wide data.

V3a delivers 'in the round' analysis of the extent to which services and assets are delivering VfM and shows where costs can be cut, service standards changed or performance improved to free up financial resources in line with the Value for Money regulatory standard. Developed in partnership with PHHS and a number of

housing providers over the past few years, V3a automates controls and simplifies VfM planning and monitoring, identifies the optimum balance of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and puts VfM at the heart of a housing provider's business intelligence activities.

The software includes standard templates and measures for service areas and assets that have been developed in partnership with housing organisations, but each organisation can decide how they want it configured by choosing their own measures, the detailed level to drill down to, and the relative weightings assigned to cost, performance, quality or social return on investment.

V3a costs around £5,000 including all set up and configuration, plus an annual subscription of £1,000.



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MET's IT award & Visualmetrics partnership

Birmingham-based housing IT specialist MET has announced that it has been awarded the AccredIT standard from CompTIA, a non-profit trade association that promotes the global interests of IT professionals and companies.

After completing the AccredIT UK standard successfully, MET was subject to an additional level of vetting for customer satisfaction and was successful in gaining the additional IT Business Trustmark. The accreditation is designed to validate an IT company's ability to demonstrate sound business practices and provide quality service. The credential demonstrates that an IT company follows industry best practices relating to service agreements, standard operating procedures, and systems and tools for delivering its services.

Ian Vickers, managing director, MET, said, "We are delighted to receive the Trustmark as it follows feedback on customer satisfaction. We get no greater satisfaction than knowing our clients appreciate the efforts we make to maintain the highest levels of service for them."

Partnership with Visualmetrics

MET has also announced a partnership with Visualmetrics, the business intelligence and data housing software provider.

MET reported that its award-winning technology products, services and consultancy, combined with Visualmetrics' business intelligence and data warehousing expertise, means that the two companies can provide a high-quality selection of services to housing providers.

Vickers from MET said, "Both companies are committed to the housing sector and we both have a lot of experience that when combined puts us in a unique position in the market. Our clients can call on a depth of knowledge and skills from the partnership that would be difficult to find elsewhere."

Chris Coan, managing director, Visualmetrics, said, "The synergies of business culture, technical skills, social housing sector knowledge, and our shared focus on putting customers at the centre of the business experience makes the combined offers from MET and Visualmetrics very compelling."

GIS AND MAPPING

GIS innovation from Cadcorp user group

Cadcorp's housing user group event in London at the beginning of February highlighted some of the ways in which housing providers are using GIS and mapping as a strategic tool for their business operations.

Steve Litchfield and Dean Ballard described how Orbit Group is using GIS as a business intelligence tool for analysing and presenting key geographic data sets, such as the Census and NOMIS. The technology is being used to help management decide where and what to build in order to meet predicted housing needs, and how to make

the most of their existing stock of around 38,000 properties.

Alex Hill, GIS manager at Plus Dane Group, explained the importance of integrating GIS technology with a housing provider's back-office systems, because integration isn't just about being able to visualise properties, land, and maintenance responsibilities on a map, but also about adding 'spatial value' to the back-office systems.

Hill explained how Plus Dane was using GIS to help with the mutual exchanges needed as a result of benefits reform, enabling under- or over-occupied properties in the same area to be exchanged to reduce the effects of the 'bedroom tax'.

Having installed Cadcorp SIS last summer, London & Quadrant Housing Trust is now working with a specialist data capture services company, Oxford Data Consultancy, to provide detailed information by combining the use of Ordnance Survey maps and Land Registry boundaries. L&Q plans to link Cadcorp

SIS with its internal housing management system and to exploit the resulting location intelligence for hotspot mapping of anti-social behaviour, for analysing housing stock and repair activity, and for generating tenant satisfaction maps.

Craig Godwin from Oxford Data Consultancy demystified what is involved in the data capture process and reported that contract value savings of 10-15 per cent are not unusual when a housing provider enters contractual negotiations (and renegotiations) with its grounds maintenance contractors armed with accurate data on the extent and characteristics of the grounds being maintained.

Godwin added that the data capture process often throws up inaccuracies and inconsistencies in Land Registry records which a housing provider should address sooner rather than later. At the same time, housing providers sometimes benefit from a windfall when the data capture process reveals the existence of properties that it didn't know it owned.



GGP Systems has developed an app to let field-based workers do live searches for council records on smartphones and tablets.

Records on the move from GGP

Designed to make it quicker and easier for housing providers to access records held in different local authority departments, the application provides access to records via a central address database and can be used on iPads, iPhones and Android devices. The availability of the app follows GGP's development of its web-based gazetteer management system, GGP eNGz, which returns search results within two seconds, even when accessing a national dataset comprising millions of complex address records.

The app will enable more work to be done remotely. As more and more housing and local authority functions are centralised, a mobile worker can carry a greater variety of duties away from the office. Using the app, a housing officer making a house call to sort out benefits could also access records relating to council tax, property maintenance and social services, and a planning officer inspecting a new build could look up street naming and numbering records, report a faulty street light and even provide permission for tree work.



Catalyst Housing deploys EasyShare intranet

Catalyst Housing has completed the implementation of a new SharePoint-based intranet from ClerksWell. The EasyShare system is now being used throughout the housing provider, replacing an outdated, externally-hosted intranet that was difficult to use.

The amalgamation of three housing associations into a single housing group to form Catalyst Housing was the impetus behind the decision to improve communications and collaboration using a modern and intuitive intranet.

Neil McMaster, head of ICT service delivery, Catalyst Housing, said, "We wanted to standardise all of our internal communications, policies and procedures because we felt that this would be an important step towards aligning the previously separate providers and housing associations as one company."

Catalyst Housing had already installed a new SharePoint 2010 environment and it was keen to use it as an intranet platform. The new intranet needed to have a more user-friendly interface to attract end-users and encourage more use of the intranet as a communications platform.

McMaster said, "We were faced with the choice of either recruiting a SharePoint developer or commissioning a third-party SharePoint consultancy to develop a bespoke solution. Neither of these

options would be sufficiently quick or low cost, so we looked for alternatives and discovered ClerksWell's SharePoint-based intranet system, EasyShare.

"We chose EasyShare because it cut out lengthy development times, the cost was fixed and we were able to see the intranet demonstrated before we spent any money, including the improved navigation and search functionality. The ability to rapidly deploy EasyShare and the pre-built nature of the system were major factors in our decision. With EasyShare we could pick and choose the web parts and templates for the functionality we wanted, which meant that we weren't paying for features we didn't need."

Implementation began in mid-September 2012 and Catalyst's fully functional EasyShare intranet went live in mid-December; the three-month timeframe would have been shorter if there hadn't been some internal resourcing problems.

McMaster said, "As a mark of how smoothly the project went, we bought seven extra days of development time and we still have around half of those left for future work."

"Our intranet is a key part of our future IT strategy. The change has been really striking and perhaps the best part has been the positive feedback from the users."

FSG saves £250,000 with Sovereign



FSG Property Services has reported that halfway through a year-long engagement with Sovereign Business Integration Group, it has already quantified savings of £200,000 in cost reductions, with further savings of £50,000 expected by the end of the project.

Sovereign has provided IT consultancy and implementation support for a new system to accommodate FSG's business expansion. Sovereign was also closely involved in the procurement process, evaluating and negotiating with FSG's potential suppliers.

Sean Kennedy, operations and development director, FSG Property Services, said, "We would not have been able to identify and specify our requirements to this level of detail without Sovereign's help, and by having Sovereign run the procurement for us, it meant we took less time away from our clients. The investment in Sovereign's support is a fraction of what we have managed to save."

Britannic wins VMware accreditation

Britannic Technologies has secured Professional Service Provider status with VMware following over 18 months of development work on cloud and virtualisation solutions based on the VMware platform. Britannic has a considerable track record with VMware, having already built a VMware hosting platform that is now being delivered across three datacentres around the UK.

Jonathan Sharp, sales and marketing director, Britannic Technologies, said, "We are seeing growing interest in migrating telephony to the cloud. We predicted this a couple of years ago as the benefits became more evident and we expect the curve of adoption to get much steeper."

Daniel Carter, EMEA director for cloud solutions and services, Specialist

Distribution Group (VMware's distributor), said, "Britannic Technologies is ahead of the field in delivering Mitel solutions on a VMware platform. With significant internal investment in its VMware hosted platform and developers who are enhancing voice solutions on VMware, Britannic's strategic vision, combined with in-depth technical competence, should ensure its customers achieve the best possible solutions."



Biscon Planning secures North Devon Homes

Nasreen Hussain, Director of Resources, North Devon Homes

North Devon Homes has been working with Biscon Planning, a Gloucestershire-based risk and business continuity consultancy, for the past nine months to develop a business continuity management System to improve its resilience.

The programme began with a series of meetings with key areas of NDH to identify the business-critical activities and the resources needed to carry out those activities. This was followed by the production of a comprehensive risk assessment and business impact analysis, allowing NDH to fully identify the range of risks to the business and their possible impact on business-critical activities.

An incident management team was established and trained to respond to the activities needing action within the first few minutes and hours of an incident so that

a logical recovery process could then be carried out to protect critical activities.

The initial programme also included a business continuity audit of key suppliers to identify any potential threats to NDH's supply chain. A questionnaire was sent out and follow-up conversations between Biscon and key suppliers identified any weaknesses, with advice offered to NDH and relevant suppliers where necessary.

Within six months of starting the initial project, a business continuity plan (BCP) had been developed and the incident management team had received the necessary training from Biscon. This included a walk-through of a range of desktop scenarios using the BCP, allowing the team to understand how to make prompt and effective decisions in response to an incident.

In addition to the BCP, a contingency plan was also developed to help NDH deal with incidents affecting its residents, such as short- or long-term evacuation of their homes. Finally, a wallet-sized 'z-fold' version of the BCP was produced for the members of the incident management team, containing the essential information from the plan that would be needed in the early stages of an incident.

Nasreen Hussain, director of resources, North Devon Homes, said, "Biscon used a partnership approach; building on our processes and working with our staff and suppliers alike. They were highly professional in the manner in which they worked, delivering promptly and exactly what was required."

Cherchefelle outsources IT to Comtec

Comtec is providing Cherchefelle Housing Association with a fully-outsourced IT and telephony infrastructure. The implementation of the Citrix-based system followed the housing provider's need to replace its outdated telephony system and server infrastructure, cater to a more mobile workforce, and accommodate new services.

Cherchefelle was keen to implement resilient IT and communications systems that would support its day-to-day operations, with improvements in network performance, mobility, business continuity and customer service all high on the agenda.

Cherchefelle was looking for a solution provider who not only had the right technical experience, but could also deliver the necessary services on a fully outsourced basis, leaving Cherchefelle free to concentrate on its core business.

Comtec's first implementation was a Citrix-based hosted server system to support the increase in workforce mobility. This was followed by a hosted IP telephony system based on the latest Avaya PBX and IP handsets with SIP trunking. Comtec now provides a 24/7 network operation centre to support all incoming requirements for remote fixes and an experienced team of engineers to provide on-site support and maintenance when required.

A year after the initial implementation, Cherchefelle relocated its head office. Comtec's specialist IT relocations team removed, transported and reinstalled the housing provider's entire IT estate in the new offices, with the full migration completed during a single 24 hour period.

Mark Bellinger, chief executive, Cherchefelle Housing Association, said, "We specialise in helping people with mental illness or learning disabilities, young people leaving care and elderly people. Our floating support services also work with vulnerable people living in their own homes or in temporary accommodation.

"We manage and deliver all of these services from our main office and subsequent branch offices. It was this wide network of offices and their related communications requirements that we enlisted Comtec to maintain and support."

Business-critical applications are now delivered securely to the mobile workforce and application management is simpler and more cost effective. For the first time, Cherchefelle has access to professional contact-centre functionality and the addition of SIP trunking has reduced monthly call and line rental charges.

Housing Technology 2013 report – Review of IT Suppliers

We are just finalising the layout phase of the production of the imminent Housing Technology Research report – 'Spectrum 2013: Review of IT Suppliers' and expect to distribute it at the beginning of April. Now that we have completed the data analysis, we are confident that the report 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 housing IT executives responsible for over 3.7 million properties, based around 19 technology areas, resulting in 26,000+ data points. The report will be split into two areas:

Core business applications

- 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
- Workflow.

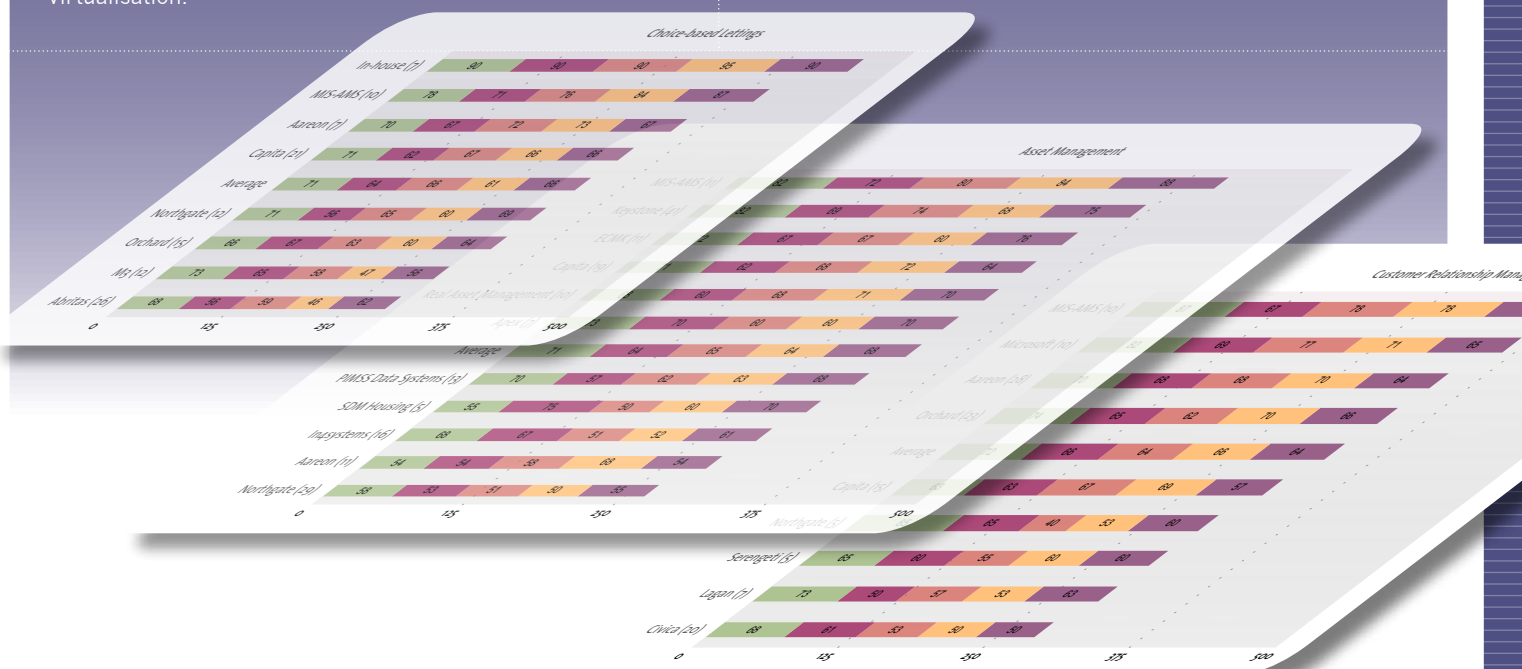
Infrastructure areas

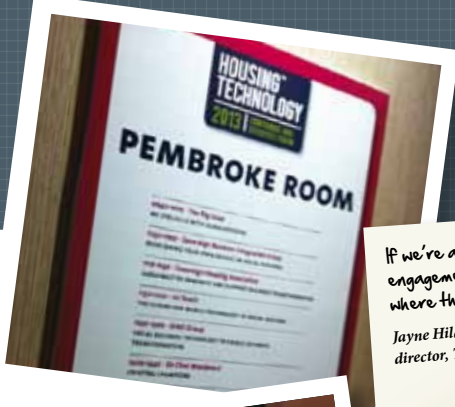
- DR & business continuity
- Intranets
- Network (WAN & LAN)
- PDAs, smartphones & tablets
- Remote working
- Storage
- Unified communications (incl. telephony)
- Virtualisation.

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

All survey respondents will be automatically sent a free copy of the report as soon as it is published. Everyone else can order it at www.housing-technology.com/report.

The report costs £295 plus VAT (£595 after 31 March 2013) for housing providers, local councils and other public sector organisations, and £795 plus VAT (£1,295 after 31 March 2013) for IT and technology companies, consultancies and other business service providers.





If we're after customer engagement, we need to fish where the fish are.

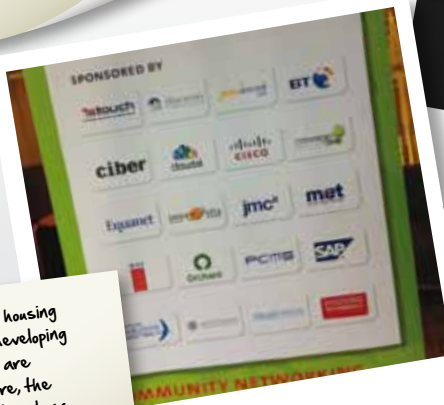
Jayne Hilditch, corporate services director, Thames Valley Housing

Business information systems are 5 per cent hardware, 5 per cent software and 90 per cent people. The first 10 per cent generates information but it is the latter 90 per cent that generates value.

David Jepson, group deputy chief executive, The Riverside Group

In these times of austerity, can housing providers really afford not to understand the value for money standard and the benefits of proper procurement systems and processes?

Neil Charlton, head of ICT, First Wessex



Cloud solutions for housing management are developing and although they are not yet fully mature, the direction of travel is clear.

John Paul, technical director, ConsultEast

Cloud computing is about working smarter, not harder!

Matt Roberts, cloud specialist, Equanet



BJOD is something that housing providers can't ignore, but the jury is out regarding whether it will have a major impact due to concerns about data management.

Charles Brooks, principal consultant, Sovereign Business Integration Group

If you want to make positive changes to how your organisation performs, get rid of your housing management department. We did and we've never looked back.

Paul Lees, group chief executive, Adactus Housing Group



We are a housing agency that happens to employ staff, not an employment agency that happens to build and manage housing.

Brian Moran, group director of corporate services, Adactus Housing Group



Work used to be a place you went to, now it is something that you do. If one million Dutch workers were to telecommute one day a week, all Dutch traffic congestion would disappear.

Henk Korevaar, founder & digital nomad, F-jectis

Having access to the detailed customer information on the 'patch' not only reduces the number of call backs but also improves customer service.

Steve Green, project delivery manager, Gentoo Group

Think about technology as an enabler because work is what you do, not where you go.

Selina Olah, finance director, Orbit Services



Using the principles of enterprise architecture within the business are the only way to ensure value for money and an integrated approach to underpinning organisational requirements.

Mick Capern, business systems manager, Alliance Homes

IT can't be a utility service and needs to transform to deliver real 'value add' and drive innovation and simplicity.

John Pollitt, IT director, Sovereign Housing

Your approach for business improvement must support the delivery of your corporate objectives and has to be subject to regular review; if something isn't working, change it!

Philip Day, resources director, Thrive Homes

Housing Technology 2013 in review

If we want to get serious about online repairs, we must make it easier for tenants to log a repair online than it is to pick up the phone.

Chris Deery, head of ICT, Solihull Community Housing

There are 39m Facebook users in the UK who have an average of 130 'Friends'; whether you like it or not, you will need to connect with your tenants through social media.

Peter Marland, director of housing services, Ashton Pioneer Homes

If you want to get better, think about the service you're offering and use the intelligence on your systems to shape what your customers want.

Martin Barber, assistant director for IT & facilities management, City West Housing Trust

The biggest problem this year will be people burying their heads in the sand, and I don't just mean tenants. Arrears are going to double, revenues will fall and management costs will increase.

Aidan Dunphy, product manager, Orchard Information Systems

The contact centre has changed; bring social media into your organisation.

Alistair Sergeant, technology director, Advanced 365



The fourth annual Housing Technology conference took place at the end of February at the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry, with an all-time high of more than 350 participants, over 45 exclusive presentations, and 19 exhibitors and sponsors.

We were delighted to welcome Sir Clive Woodward OBE, World Cup Winner and Team GB's Director of Sport for the London Olympics, and John Bird, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Big Issue, to give the keynote presentations.

Clive's presentation to a packed room extolled his mantra that 'talent alone isn't enough', how great teams are made of great individuals, and that whoever wins in IT wins in business, citing his emphasis on using the latest technology when training his teams and athletes.

John Bird's equally well-attended presentations during both the pre-event evening drinks reception and the opening of the conference were typically forthright and uncompromising, emphasising the need to move to a culture of 'hand up, not handout' when it comes to helping the homeless and the vulnerable.

There were too many speakers and presentations to mention individually, but they covered the spectrum of housing's hot topics, such as

universal credit and welfare reform, digital inclusion, bring your own device and mobile working, social media, cloud computing, value for money, and performance management.

The conference was supported by a number of IT suppliers and consultancies dedicated to serving the housing sector: 1st Touch, Aareon, AccuServ, Advanced 365, BT, Ciber, Cisco, CloudXL, ConvergeOne, Equanet, JMC IT, MET, ONI, Orchard, PCMS, SAP, South View Solutions, Sovereign Business Integration Group and Visual Metrics.

We have already started the initial planning for the 2014 conference. The next conference will feature some striking changes from the four previous ones as we strive to make each event better than the last. This will include changes to how we schedule the presentations, the length and timing of the event, more keynote speakers and presenters from other market sectors, the provision of a bigger exhibition area and more opportunities for networking with peers from other housing providers. We will announce details of the 2014 conference in the May issue.

Housing Technology would like to thank all of the speakers, sponsors, exhibitors and delegates who all combined to make the 2014 event such a success.



Getting cultural acceptance of the benefits and restrictions of desktop virtualisation is key to the success of any VDI project. We played on the name of our iGel thin clients which is German for 'hedgehog' and ran competitions, gave away toys and served chocolate hedgehog cake.

John Sammons, ICT services & technical manager, Isos Housing





Through the looking glass – Data, transparency and housing

Alan Fogden, Head of Public Sector, Easynet

Every minute of every day, we generate immense, astonishing amounts of data. We send more than 204 million emails, share in excess of 100,000 Tweets and download over 47,000 applications every sixty seconds. The world's information is doubling every year. Big data is a huge issue, and it's shaping social and economic change.

There are three key drivers responsible for the current focus on big data: the availability and accessibility of data; the measurement and analytics of data; and the increase in devices we can use to access the data.

For housing providers, there are very specific challenges when it comes to managing the ever-increasing volumes of data, such as:

- The consolidation and integration of systems as housing groups change in structure and acquire smaller groups;
- Sharing of data between different organisations as tenants move to different local authority areas;
- The need to improve the delivery and management of services to tenants;
- Reacting to the change in the way tenants choose to communicate, preferring to share information online or using a mobile app;
- The management of constantly-changing housing stock and the resulting data;
- The migration of historical data to new systems;
- Universal credit fast approaching and the effect this will have on IT management;
- The management of information on contractors;
- The requirement for a cost-efficient organisation.

Most housing providers have, at the very least, three or four main systems in which this vast amount of data is stored and provides a platform for their big data strategies: housing management, asset management and contractor management. If those systems can talk to each other across a robust network, so much the better. And if the systems are managed in the cloud to save money, reduce overheads and benefit from the flexibility of adding services as required, that's another tick in the 'future proof' box. But we need to think beyond this: without transparency, an organisation's big data strategy will fall at the first hurdle.

Transparency drives transformation, and increases trust, motivation, productivity and performance. Transparency of data enables choice, empowers staff and tenants and leads to informed decision making. By transparency, I don't mean opening up your data and increasing your security risk. I mean implementing some analytical measurements, some accessible applications, and surrounding these with a culture of openness.

Open data is a priority for the prime minister, and this is an area in which the UK government is blazing a trail. Its understanding of, and commitment to, the issues and benefits of openness in data are outstanding. Admittedly the government has a social responsibility to foster an open environment, but organisations both public and private can follow its lead.

Francis Maude, minister for the cabinet office and paymaster general, in the 2012 government white paper on 'Open Data: Unleashing the Potential', talks about transparency driving prosperity. Opening up, he says, will "empower citizens, foster innovation and reform public services". 9,000 data sets are available on the portal www.data.gov.uk, ranging from online crime maps, weather information and transport data to cabinet office salary details and spending data. There is housing data on tenure, owner occupation and the social rented sector, on house prices and housing stock. It's fascinating, engrossing, and importantly it helps understand our communities and our places within them.

The Government understands the significance of data as a tool to create openness and enable economic and social benefits. Its commitment and investment is clear; in December 2012, Paul Maltby was appointed to the government's role of director for transparency and open data, a role which will see him deliver the UK's commitments to openness. Liam Maxwell was named recently as the government's first CTO. But what can our organisations learn from what is clearly more than just a vote winner?

Accessing housing data has huge implications for housing providers and the government alike. It demonstrates how we want to live. It provides information on socio-economic trends, and regional and cultural preferences. It helps us match stock to demand and reduces the risk and cost of stock standing empty.

At a granular level, access to big data analytics means we can check a tenant's credit rating and payment history, and create a numerical picture of the future tenant. For a potential resident, finding information on landlords' properties, on fire safety regulations and sourcing contact details for locally-based maintenance companies could save a housing provider time and effort.

Accessing this information is not difficult; in fact, there are now web-based information services specifically for the housing sector which give us the ability to map, measure and report on data sources appropriate to communities. Housing management teams can use this information for smarter decision-making.

To make the most of the opportunities big data offers housing providers, we need to:

- Ensure the systems, processes and applications are in place to enable openness and simple access to the right data for the right people;
- Implement an intelligent infrastructure to support these systems and those needed in the future;
- Communicate aims, objectives and success measures and set up the tools to create a dialogue and encourage feedback – consider a portal and internal social networks;
- Appoint key individuals to drive the activity, not just 'project leaders' – transparency of data isn't a temporary measure to drive sales or win media votes, it's part of an organisation's ethos;
- Educate employees, customers and citizens not only on access but on the importance of privacy and security of data they are producing and working with;
- Foster a culture of openness across the organisation, of which clarity of data is just a part, and ensure the tools and channels are in place to make this happen;
- Revisit and reassess progress on a regular basis;
- Lead by example: open up the entire organisation.

The more information we can store, access, share and carefully manage, the more we can analyse and understand housing. Having this data at our fingertips empowers us. It equips us with the ability to shape trends and forecast the future of our communities.

Alan Fogden is head of public sector at Easynet.

Happy birthday to DtL Creative

DtL Creative, a specialist housing IT consultancy set up by David Loudon, is celebrating its second birthday by offering housing providers the opportunity to rapidly review the health of all of their housing-related systems and related business processes at what the company describes as, "a very reasonable cost". This birthday offer will continue until July 2013.

The consultancy has now worked with a variety of housing providers across housing, finance and asset management systems and CRM, with the aim of helping housing providers get the best out of their systems, whether they are

procuring, implementing, integrating or simply reviewing systems and looking for improvements.

Joe McBride, head of finance, Williamsburgh Housing Association, said, "When we were planning the workload and skills needed to buy a new housing management and finance system, it became evident that we needed some support to help us through the government procurement process, so we brought in David Loudon from DtL Creative to help us. He fitted in with the team right away and hit the ground running, talking us through

the process and getting involved in the actual procurement itself.

"David also independently reviewed our system specification and provided an independent external review of what we had put together, offering not only positive comment on the content, but questioning and suggesting additions or amendments where necessary. His housing knowledge and experience was invaluable to us, providing not only support in the supplier selection process, but a complete and comprehensive scoring system which saved us a lot of valuable time in coming up with one of our own."



Family Housing cuts lone worker risk with Identicom

Family Housing has equipped its field-based staff and other lone workers with Connexion2's award winning and ACPO 'secured by design' accredited lone worker devices.

Family Housing's previous method for lone worker safety relied on a dedicated button on a mobile phone to raise the alarm if the lone worker felt threatened. However, the housing provider's front-line staff said that if faced with a potentially dangerous situation, they would have to reach for their phone, which could be at the bottom of a bag, or the phone could easily be knocked out of their hand.

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.

Baz Patel, information systems manager, Family Housing, said, "We needed a more robust system for our lone workers and we have therefore made Identicom part of our health and safety policy. With Identicom, field-based workers can use the 'red alert' at any time if they feel vulnerable, knowing that they will quickly get support."

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.



SDM Housing gains ISO 9001 standard

SDM Housing Software has gained the internationally-recognised ISO 9001 registration from the British Assessment Bureau, demonstrating SDM's commitment to customer service and quality in delivery.

ISO 9001 was first introduced in 1987 and requires organisations to demonstrate that they do

what they say they do and that they have a quality management system in place to ensure consistency and improvement. Certified organisations are committed to continuous improvement and are assessed annually to ensure progress is being maintained.

John Saunders, managing director, SDM Housing Software, said, "Not many customers get to see their suppliers' back-office activities, so this recognition demonstrates we can provide a quality solution from quotation to delivery as well as through our customer helpdesk and customer engagement programmes."



Customer service and rental diversification

Philip Evans, Managing director, Pex Software

There is a growing clamour in the UK for more provision of rented property, whether provided as social housing or private rented accommodation, and the emerging mantra is that it should be accompanied by a 'high-quality management regime'.

The high-quality criterion is emphasised in the recently launched £200m 'build to rent' fund, while at the same time universal credit and welfare reform places greater risk on housing providers in terms of rent collection and arrears.

New technologies

What this all adds up to is that both the public and private sectors will have to embrace the latest in web and internet technology to ensure the efficient management of their housing portfolios, and that brand quality will differentiate the good from the bad.

The loss of rented housing came about largely as a result of the Thatcher government's 'right to buy' programme in the 1980s which saw home ownership as the cure for the country's social ills. Almost two million homes were transferred from public to private ownership during that period.

Supply and demand

However housing supply has not kept pace with demand and as a result, there are almost 1.8 million households on English local authority housing registers. Those who would want to own their own homes cannot afford to because house prices have escalated to such a degree that the average age of a first-time buyer, which fell to about 25 in the 1980s, has now reached 37 and the National Housing Federation has warned that it could soon reach 43.

Into this vacuum has come the private rented sector which has grown rapidly in recent years and now has 3.6 million households compared with some two million in the early 1980s. The sector is very diverse, from students and young professionals to families who are making a long-term commitment to the private rented sector.

The problem is that unlike some other countries, there is no large-scale institutional investment in that sector, so the government commissioned the

Montague Report which was published last August and proposed a range of measures. In response, the government has moved on some of the recommendations with the launch of the £200 million 'build to rent' fund and the £10 billion debt guarantee scheme that will support the delivery of new homes purpose-built for private rent and for additional affordable housing.

On the assumption that the incentives are attractive enough to bring in private institutional investment, then there are opportunities for far-sighted housing IT providers to take advantage of the significant increase in the supply of large-scale private rented housing.

New revenue streams

Significantly, moves in this direction have already come about as a result of the reduced government grant for affordable housing. Because of this, some housing providers are beginning to look at creating subsidiaries financed by institutional investment which will buy or develop homes for let to young professionals at market rents. The income from the private rented division will then create cross-subsidy for affordable homes.

One such housing provider is Thames Valley Housing which last year launched its private rented sector subsidiary, Fizzy. The plan is for a £200 million property portfolio, with Thames Valley investing £30 million alongside debt and equity investors. They're well on their way and in January 2013, Fizzy attracted £40 million of debt financing from Macquarie Capital. The buzz is around its management skills and the importance it attaches to the quality of its brand.

Quality of service

Key to that is gaining a competitive advantage in the level and quality of service Fizzy offers. One fundamental aspect of this is how Fizzy keeps in touch with its tenants and provides them with a level of service that they would expect to receive in the private sector. This cannot be achieved by using conventional property management technology which is traditionally designed to manage property; today's tenant is looking for contemporary service delivery.

The differentiation is achieved by creating a technology-enabled brand that appeals to young tenants or 'renty somethings' as they are sometimes known. Fizzy gets straight to the point on its website declaring, "We believe renters deserve a better deal" and it provides this by its ease of access for prospective tenants.

The online registration process is user friendly and is designed to appeal to savvy tenants who are likely to have already experienced a high level of customer service within the current generation of student accommodation facilities.

From the moment a prospective tenant shows interest in a flat, Pex's web-based technology transforms the customer experience. An Assured Shorthold Tenancy agreement is created together with optional services that are akin to booking flights online, so if you want a furniture pack or broadband, this is all available through Fizzy on their booking site. At the same time, all the credit-referencing checks are being undertaken so that what could normally take three weeks is undertaken in perhaps a couple of days.

Customer portals

Once the tenant has moved in (and of course, the tenant furniture pack is there and installed by the time they move in) then the customer portal provides access to numerous services, from checking their account or changing their broadband package to reporting a repair. Or they can see "Bob" the property manager face to face, as Bob is based on site.

Jayne Hilditch, corporate services director at Thames Valley Housing, said, "The success of housing providers' forays into the private rented sector will be dependent on providers living up to the expectations of young professionals. We need to understand their expectations and aspirations, and deliver on them.

"And from the point of view of investors, they need to be confident that properties are being well managed and that operationally, the efficiencies that can be achieved by the use of web technology are being leveraged. They are looking for returns and risk levels that are attractive and compare with other forms of investment."

Customer service and rental diversification

Continued from the opposite page

As the private rented sector moves forward with its online service delivery, the path is being prepared for the social housing sector.

With the introduction of universal credit, there will be a growing number of social housing customers coming online and looking for a similar service model. It won't happen overnight, but digital exclusion is real and it's coming.

Furthermore, a recent report from the Moody's credit rating service (covered in the January issue) suggested that with universal credit, housing providers face financial risks

in terms of rent collection which could be alleviated by much improved systems of communicating with tenants.

Whether public or private, it is clear that there are opportunities for technology

providers to step up to the mark and ensure that tenants have access to internet-based services in the way that is standard now in most walks of life.

Philip Evans is managing director of Pex xSoftware.

Orbit gains international security accreditation

Orbit Group has just been awarded the ISO27001 accreditation for information security by the international business standards company BSI, making the housing provider one of only 500 companies in the UK holding this level of information security.

The focus on gaining the accreditation is a result of more services being available online and greater mobility and remote working by Orbit's staff, both of which could pose data security problems without the right information security processes and procedures.

David Leach, director of technology and transformation, said, "This accreditation is testament to Orbit's attitudes to information security. We are aware that as our staff get more mobile, so does our information and we want to put the measures in place to keep that information safe and secure.

"Orbit can now assure customers that they are operating in a safe and secure environment and taking information security seriously."

No more dripping boilers with UK invention



A gas engineer working for Derby City Council has launched Drip Buddy, a patented product aimed at reducing the damage caused by leaking boilers, after two years' development.

The Drip Buddy is a tray placed underneath the boiler which captures and contains water if it leaks and then removes it safely by linking it with the existing water system through a safety valve, therefore preventing damage to floors, ceilings and any personal property in the event of a boiler leak.

Andrew Ging, the inventor of Drip Buddy, said, "I came up with the idea for the Drip Buddy through my day-to-day work as a gas engineer at Derby City Council. The aim of the product is to help reduce insurance claims for damage to ceilings, floors and

personal belongings, which can sometimes run into many thousands of pounds. "It's great that this product was invented, manufactured and distributed all in Derby."

Although Drip Buddy isn't what Housing Technology normally covers, we are keen to support start-up businesses like this that are helping to boost the local economy. Furthermore, Ging said that he is keen to get number of housing providers to take a look at Drip Buddy.

Ging said: "It would be great to get a few housing providers to take Drip Buddy and I believe there is a demand."





CTXchange and the Charity Technology Trust

Jon Brewer, Development Director, CTT

Did you know that CTXchange is the only channel in the UK for software donations from Microsoft, as well as a number of other technology providers?

While CTXchange is primarily used by charities, many housing providers may also meet eligibility criteria and start receiving significant savings on software such as Windows 8, Microsoft Office, Norton Antivirus and many other titles.

Many housing providers have already saved tens of thousands from their IT budget, as a small admin fee is all that each eligible organisation needs to pay. CTT provides the CTXchange programme in partnership with TechSoup who manage the relationship with the donors on a global basis.

The programme is funded by administration fees that are around three per cent of the commercial rate of the software.

Melin Homes has been registered with CTX for over three years and has made savings of nearly 96 per cent on their IT budget. It has received over £117,000 worth of software, at a fraction of the cost. The housing provider is responsible for over 3,000 homes and has been able to make remote desktops available for staff, transforming working methods and saving time for the IT team.

The process is simple. Register online, provide a copy of an HMRC exemption form, together with an FSA registration form and we can let you know what donations you could be eligible for. Licensing guidelines are set by the individual partner; for example, Microsoft states that, within a two-year period, each eligible organisation can request products from up to ten of the title groups, with a 50-licence maximum for desktop and operating systems or licence-only title groups.

Currently the following titles are available through CTXchange (depending on eligibility):

Adobe	Design, web building and photo editing
Bytes of Learning	UltraKey software teaching touch-typing
Cisco	Switches, routers and wireless plus software applications
Cisco Flip Video	End of line digital video cameras
Citrix Online	GoToMeeting online audio conferencing and desktop sharing
Eagle	Audio conferencing
Flickr	Pro Accounts for online photo storage and sharing
Fluid Surveys	Online survey service
Huddle	Web-based online collaboration tool
Mailshell	Anti-spam desktop software
Microsoft	Server, PC and Mac operating systems, Office & Utilities
SAP Software	Business Objects & Crystal Reports
Slide Rocket	Web-based presentation service
Symantec Desktop	Norton software for anti-virus and spam for PC & Mac
Symantec Enterprise	Server-based anti-virus and backup software
Tangient	Web based hosted Wiki service
Winfrasoft	VPN software for server and client

And what else does CTT do? We began life in 2001 with a mission to demonstrate how the effective use of technology can improve the efficiency of third sector organisations. Today, we provide online payments systems and email marketing services in addition to CTXchange.

However, we are also open to new ideas and programmes to help organisations across the third sector make the most of their investments in technology.

At one end of the scale, small voluntary organisations can improve efficiency and take the pressure off stretched resources

through the use of technology. However, with limited resources and often very challenging goals, technology is often an understandably low priority. At the other end of the scale, we hope to enable more sharing and learning between the very

CTXchange and the Charity Technology Trust

Continued from the opposite page

largest organisations and also with those further down the scale in size.

Having recently conducted a survey of around 150 charities in partnership with The Worshipful Company of Information Technologists, LASA, IT4Communities and Adapta Consulting, we have found that two-thirds employ no IT staff and around 50 per cent had no IT skills in-house, whether paid or voluntary. The cost of IT products, services and advice is also a significant barrier.

Unlike their third sector 'cousins' in the housing sector (who even have their own dedicated conference and publication!), many charities fail to think strategically about technology and the benefits it could bring.

CTT is increasingly working to enable more organisations to engage strategically and effectively with technology. We're seeing a real need for more CEOs and trustees to

understand the opportunities presented by technology so that it can be considered at a more strategic level.

And we also see the need for better ways of engaging technology providers – those who have an understanding of (and a heart for) the sector, as well as those who are willing to volunteer 'pro bono' support or donate or discount their products and services to make them affordable.

The sorts of statements we hear include: "I'm a charity CEO. Technology could help us be more efficient and effective, but I have no idea what my first step should be". And many technology providers say things like: "I want to help charities in the UK. I really am genuine in my desire to do real CSR and give something back, but who can help me with this?"

Here at CTT, we believe we are in a good position, together with other partners,

sharing common goals, to start addressing these issues.

Providing clearer sign-posts to thought leadership (online content, training or consultancy), together with a well-publicised marketplace (enabling the tech sector providers to engage with third sector needs) and communities (self-support networks) are all ideas that could start to make a difference. The third sector can be strengthened by better planning, procurement and deployment of exciting new technologies.

If you would like to know more about any of this, and are possibly interested in joining CTT and our partners on this journey, then we would be delighted to hear from you.

Jon Brewer is the development director of CTT (www.ctt.org).

Housing Technology review – Cherry keyboards

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No, this isn't an April Fool, although regular readers could be forgiven for thinking so, given that Housing Technology rarely runs product reviews, particularly about humble bits of IT hardware.

The background to this review was when we received a press release from Cherry about its new range of mechanical 'gold series' keyboards. Most of us have become used to the standard keyboards supplied with desktop PCs or smaller laptop keyboards, so how much difference does a 'proper' keyboard make?

In short, comparing a standard keyboard with a Cherry one is the same as comparing a Vauxhall Corsa with a Ferrari; the difference is simply extraordinary. As full-time writers and journalists, we type a lot so a keyboard is pretty important. The Cherry G80-3000, which is one of the company's longest-established

keyboards, is crisper, faster and more accurate to use than any keyboard we've used before. Simply put, it boosts your productivity if you do lots of typing or data inputting.

The underlying point of reviewing this keyboard (there are of course other 'high end' keyboards on the market) is that amid housing providers' strategies for increasing productivity and boosting efficiencies, something as basic as a decent keyboard could make a measurable difference to the productivity of your staff and therefore your operational performance.

For the sake of disclosure, Housing Technology was allowed to keep the press sample it received from Cherry, but even if we hadn't, we would have bought one anyway after having reviewed it.

Viridian communicates welfare reform

Welfare Reform



Viridian Housing has created a very accessible and clear video for its tenants to explain how they are likely to be affected by the forthcoming welfare reforms, including universal credit, benefit caps and the bedroom tax.

The online film features a variety of case studies which show examples of typical residents in different circumstances and the options that are available.

Johanne Batty, acting head of housing, Viridian Housing, said, "Welfare reform will have a significant impact on claimants, yet many may not fully understand how they will be affected. This video is a great way for tenants to learn about the reforms and access information in a way that they can easily understand."

The short video can be viewed at:
www.viridianhousing.org.uk/welfarereform.

Battle of the boardbooks

Sir – I am writing in reply to the news item in the November issue regarding Accent Group's use of iPads in the boardroom. In the spirit of transparency, I should point out that I work for Diligent Boardbooks, provider of an electronic board portal used by thousands of boards around the world and many FTSE-100 companies in the UK.

Accent Group is using a £2.99 GoodReader app to download its board papers to iPads and seems happy with it. In my opinion, a company's board papers are the most important documents they have and these deserve full respect. However, with a £2.99 app, you get what you pay for. Will it give you the service, security and simplicity that you get from a proprietary electronic board portal?

Accent Group's app is essentially a domestic solution to a professional question regarding the distribution of board materials and therefore has certain limitations.

First, it provides what GoodReader describes as a "fairly strong level of data security", which in addition the user must separately turn on. If an iPad is lost or stolen, most companies will consider it essential that board papers are protected by security that meets the highest standards. A cheap PDF reader simply can't provide this. I think the idea of a competitor reading a company's innermost secrets is enough to keep any chairman awake at night. Security lies at the heart of any professional board portal so while losing an iPad may be inconvenient, you can be confident the information contained within it is protected.

Second, the difference between happy and unhappy customers normally lies in the after-sales support and service. A cheap app offers extremely limited support. In the case of GoodReader, it is via online FAQs or an email form through which users can request help. By contrast, the better professional portals will provide this via a dedicated support team 24 hours a day, every day of the year; almost inevitably, it will be at a critical time that someone's iPad is not working.

The last element is simplicity. This needs to be inherent in the solution and enhanced by the quality of training and support. There are plenty of technologies that initially appear simple but leave many people struggling to grasp them, leading to rejection of the technology. Professional portals spend a great deal of time making sure that their solutions are simple and expressly meet the needs of boards and their directors.

If a company considers that a board helps management and provides valuable oversights, they should feel comfortable giving them the correct tools to do the job. In the 21st century, electronic board portals are part of the toolkit of boards. The best question to ask is not whether board portals cost money, but whether they provide value for money and help the board and executives do their job by providing a secure, simple, well-serviced solution.

If the gentlemen of Accent would like to trial our service, I would be delighted to provide it to them free of charge. I am confident that they will appreciate the difference.

Charlie Horrell

Managing director for EMEA, Diligent Boardbooks

Accounting for size

Sir – With over 1,200 housing providers in the UK and over two-thirds of those managing fewer than 2,000 homes, smaller organisations are facing a problem. They have the same requirements when it comes to SORP and component accounting as a larger organisation, but they don't have the budgets or resources to effectively manage them.

Many housing providers with fewer than 2,000 homes might have just one finance person responsible for accounting for their entire asset base on various disparate spreadsheets, whereas a much larger organisation may have dozens of people available to work on a system designed specifically for the task. The processes these smaller organisations undertake are extremely time-consuming and inefficient, but many believe they are unable to afford a dedicated system to help them increase efficiency and flexibility.

With spreadsheets widely acknowledged as time-consuming, difficult to audit, and lacking in robustness, housing providers can gain tangible benefits by using a best-of-breed solution that can simplify statutory compliance and provide value-added analysis of their assets. In the light of the changing requirements across the sector and the need to monitor and record several components within each home, which can lead to tens of thousands of separate records, an effective component accounting system is essential to avoid inaccuracy and wasted resources.

It is now more important than ever for smaller housing providers to review their current asset accounting processes and ensure they are getting the most from their current methods. With the compliance requirements only set to increase, it is vital that housing providers of all sizes implement systems that will help them improve business efficiency at a price-point they can afford.

Karen Conneely

Group commercial manager, Real Asset Management

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 and 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

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

UK vs. The Netherlands

Sir – In The Netherlands, we have about nine IT suppliers in the social housing sector and the number of housing providers has decreased in the last few years because of mergers. The suppliers therefore need to work harder to get new customers, and a new customer for one supplier means the loss of one for the other supplier because all of the housing providers are customers of one of the nine IT suppliers.

Changing suppliers means a lot of work, a lot of costs and changes in the organisation. Therefore, the amount of switching between suppliers is not something you will do before making a good business case; there must be clearly demonstrable benefits in order to do so.

I was wondering how this specific issue (changing IT supplier) is handled in the UK, and what are the main reasons to switch supplier?

Last year I visited the Housing Technology conference in Birmingham and spoke to some of my peers in the UK – it was very useful to get an insight into the UK social housing sector. Besides that, I have spoken to some IT suppliers who are operating in the UK and I was told that there are user groups (which we also have) in the UK.

I am interested in the way the user groups function towards their respective IT suppliers. What specific agreements are there, and is there any influence on product development?

I would be keen to hear from readers in the UK on these topics.

Joop Schoppers
IT manager, Woningcorporatie De Woonplaats

A decade of Windows 8

Sir – In reply to the letter from Harneck Chilemba (finance director, Tower Hamlets Community Housing) in the January issue, a quick search at microsoft.com/lifecycle shows that Windows 8 Enterprise will reach 'extended support' on 10 January 2023 (just under a decade away at the time of writing!), whereas XP Professional with SP3 ends on 8 April 2014.

Based on Microsoft's data, Windows XP will have a lifetime of 4,481 days and Windows 8 slightly fewer at 3,734 days, a difference of 747 day. So yes, Harneck is correct; Windows 8 does have a shorter shelf life, but at least it's a published date that we know of now!

Tobie Fysh
Systems developer, Freebridge Community Housing



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