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Editor's Notes

SMAC your IT up

This issue has a strong focus on the subject of big data (see page 18), but as the article mentions, big data should really be seen as part of the bigger picture around digital convergence.

If you haven't come across the acronym SMAC yet, you certainly will soon. SMAC covers social, mobile, analytics and cloud and is at the centre of many companies' move towards consolidating and unifying all of their digital channels, with the goal of gaining insights into business performance, customer behaviours, supplier metrics and so on, that were previously fragmented across different systems.

The key aspect to SMAC isn't just the aggregation of all of your disparate data sources, it's also then having the right analytics tools to then spot patterns and trends that would otherwise be impossible to find.

This is all heady stuff for many housing providers that may have only just introduced mobile working, dynamic scheduling or self-service portals, but for housing providers wanting to leapfrog to the next level of IT and business integration, SMAC is a good place to start.

Compared with most housing providers' standalone applications, such as housing, finance and asset management, SMAC enables you to reinvent existing processes to remove complexity and discover new efficiencies, improve performance with data-driven insights for quantitative decision-making, and add speed and flexibility to anticipate market trends.

So perhaps now's the time to SMAC your IT up?

No escape from welfare reform & universal credit

Despite the patchy start to many of the universal credit pilot projects (see page five), welfare reform is going ahead and it does look likely that universal credit will be introduced, albeit in a rather longer timescale than originally planned and despite reported glitches in the DWP's IT systems.

Since there's no escape from the impact of welfare reform and universal credit, we would encourage those responsible for dealing with the IT and business changes in their organisations to come along to our **Reform IT 2013 event in September (see page 24) at the amazing BT Tower in central London.**

Reform IT 2013 will focus on the convergence of technology, universal credit and welfare reform, and digital inclusion. We have speakers confirmed from Affinity Sutton, Ashton Pioneer Homes, GreenSquare Group, Orbit Housing, Origin Housing, Wakefield & District Housing and Yorkshire Housing but with space for only 85 people at the top of the BT Tower, numbers are limited so reserve your place soon at www.housing-technology.com/reformit.

Demonstrating IT value

Compared with January 2008 and our first issue of Housing Technology, the role of the IT departments has changed almost beyond all recognition. In the last five or six years, most housing providers' boards have finally understood the importance of IT and appreciate how it can be used to transform their business operations, financial performance and, ultimately, tenant satisfaction.

That's all well and good, but it does mean that there is now greater pressure on IT teams to demonstrate their value to the wider organisation. Whereas five years ago, it might have been acceptable for IT departments to report that a new HMS had been successfully installed or that several hundred desktops had been replaced without disrupting end-users, IT directors should now focus on providing quantitative data on the value technology brings to the business and the direct benefits, savings, performance increases and so on that are enabled as a consequence.

Not only does this demonstrate the value of IT, it also serves to change the perceptions of IT from being 'just another department' to being the beating heart of the organisation, without which none of the other teams could function.

FUTURE EVENTS

Housing Technology – Reform IT 2013

19 September 2013, BT Tower, London
www.housing-technology.com/reformit

Housing Technology – 'Beer & Pizza' Evening (Invitation only)

19 November 2013, London
events@housing-technology,com

Housing Technology 2014 conference & executive forum

25-27 February 2014, Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry
conference@housing-technology.com

Gentoo takes Orchard HMS

Gentoo Group is planning to move its operations to the latest version of Orchard's housing management system and using its Customer Dashboard as a central information hub.

As part of its tenant-facing plans, Gentoo is also implementing Orchard's self-service portal and self-service mobile app, while the tenancy visits and resident involvement systems will improve internal efficiencies and support local communities.

Gentoo plans to use the Orchard systems to rationalise a number of disparate systems, with the housing provider's in-house development team using Orchard's business process management suite to create its own bespoke solutions.

Hexagon releases new LandMark 4 for housing management

Hexagon Software has just released its LandMark 4 housing management system. The web-based HMS provides immediate access to real-time data while eliminating time-consuming manual processes.

LandMark 4 has an easy-to-view dashboard that automatically delivers KPIs customised for individual users, and can be configured to provide high-level overviews of performance indicators such as rent collections, net rental yields, average length of unexpired leases and occupation rates.

Case management functionality means that tasks relating to specific events can be tracked and assigned, with clear highlighting for important actions such as rent reviews, lease expiries and break clauses. LandMark 4 enables all tasks to be managed within a single system, removing the need for staff to maintain to-do lists in other applications such as Outlook or Excel. This provides greater visibility of what is needed to run the business on a daily basis and ensures that all necessary work is completed, regardless of unexpected absences or sickness.

Mitchell Hill, managing director, Hexagon Software, said, "LandMark 4 has been written from the ground up to leverage the latest technologies with a modern user interface that requires less training, results in faster user adoption and delivers a system that people will actually enjoy using.

"By taking this approach, and not just using a web-based front-end to re-skin legacy software, we can respond quickly to changing customer demands and take advantage of the opportunities offered by advances in mainstream technology."
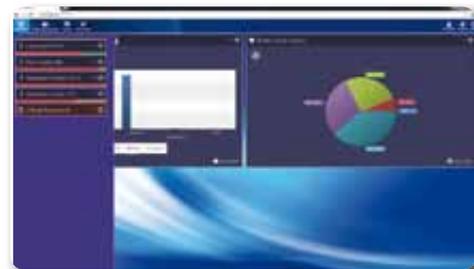
LandMark 4 includes an integrated document editor and provides rapid storage and access to supporting documents such as leases, correspondence, legal documents, inspection certificates and photographs. Integrated mapping allows users to zoom in to street level views, check locations or download directions. Standard reports can be created either on-demand or automatically emailed as PDFs to relevant staff on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, including data from other internal systems such as finance or HR.

Hill said, "LandMark 4 costs up to 40 per cent less to buy and implement compared with similarly specified systems, and also has lower on-going costs."

Housing in the clouds with Civica

Civica has just launched Housing Cx, a web-based housing management system. The system has been developed to help housing providers transform customer services and improve the experience for tenants and employees through its app-style interface, accessible any time, any place from a smartphone, tablet or netbook.

Housing Cx has integrated customer relationship management and communication capabilities so that housing providers can manage all interactions across multiple channels, including email, text and social media. The service will also enable housing providers to run tenant satisfaction surveys, develop interactive marketing campaigns and host tenant group forums.

Companies in this issue

Journey into the 'known'… Preparing for the trip

Mandy Dunstan, Head of Business Transformation, The Barnet Group

In the first of a series of articles covering Barnet Group's selection and implementation of new applications for housing management, CRM, business intelligence and HR, Mandy Dunstan, head of business transformation at The Barnet Group, outlines the background to this company-wide technology initiative.

How do you take a passion for improving services, the opportunity to introduce new technology and create modern ways of working for an organisation of 500 staff? You lead and inspire change.

The Barnet Group is owned by Barnet Council and we are the parent company to Barnet Homes, a social landlord which manages 15,000 council homes, and Your Choice Barnet, a social care organisation providing services to people with learning and physical disabilities.

Our vision is to have a public sector ethos with a private sector commercial focus. This means that we want our customers to able to 'do their part', being enabled by our staff to self-serve and to self-source alternative service options from other local providers wherever possible. By doing this, we will help the organisation to drive down the costs of service delivery, while also generating rich customer insight to further refine and personalise our service delivery.

'All Systems Go' is our project that will support us in managing the risks of failing infrastructure for our IT services, change us into a customer-centric organisation and deliver a transformation in the way we serve our customers.

The creation of a customer-centric organisation will be a key part of our project and work will be linked to the mobilisation plans to review what we currently do to substantially improve customers and residents' experience in dealing with The Barnet Group. The key defining principles for this stream of work are:

- Customers' experience should be personalised where possible.
- Customers should be able to make choices about their services, but self-help should be encouraged.
- Service provision should be based around people's lives, not service structures, and as such customer service should be joined up across all areas.
- Insight and data from customer interactions should be continually built into the delivery of services and the customer-service offer.
- Customers should be able to access services and complete transactions online wherever possible.

We worked with a selection of staff from across the organisation to redesign our technical specifications and delivered a competitive process to select our new systems. To ensure that we had buy-in from the business, frontline staff were used in the scoring and interview process and collectively all staff were involved.

Our board agreed to buy the following systems:

- iTrent for human resources
- Aareon QL for housing management and CRM
- Covalent for business intelligence
- Clearvale for the intranet

We are also introducing new technology and ways of working for our workforce. This will include introducing thin clients to support hot desking and a greener working environment, bring your own device (BYOD), and mobile working using a mobile working application from 1st Touch.

To support this, I was seconded from my head of operations role to lead this massive project, becoming head of business transformation. My background is not in IT or major infrastructure projects, but I am committed to improving the work environment for our staff and want to ensure they have self-service, real-time reporting and customer profiling to empower them.

We are serious about getting this right and have invested £2 million in technology and a project team to realise our vision. Our journey started in September 2012, when it was 'All Systems Go', and over the next few issues of Housing Technology, we will share our progress (including our mistakes!) as we upgrade almost our entire business applications environment and completely rethink how we run our organisation from a customer-facing perspective – it should be an interesting journey!

Mandy Dunstan is head of business transformation at The Barnet Group.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Cascade wins HR deal at St Vincent's

St Vincent's Housing Association is implementing dedicated HR software from Cascade to give managers access to real-time information in order to help them make better decisions around resource planning and to give its staff some self-service capabilities.

Nicola Brandon, personnel and training manager, St Vincent's Housing Association, said, "During the evaluation phase, we spoke to a lot of people in other housing associations. A few were already using Cascade and were very complimentary. We also did some reference site visits to see how the system worked in practice, not just for HR staff, but also for business managers in other departments and within the IT team.

"Cascade really covered all our needs at a very affordable cost. We have decided to implement Cascade's core HR module and the self-service, training and workflow modules."

Universal credit – Results of pilot projects

At the time of writing (the end of June 2013), the government has released its April 2013 update on some of the local authorities taking part in the pilot projects for universal credit.

Birmingham City Council
50 per cent of people attending UC briefings did not have an email address.

Dumfries & Galloway Council
A high proportion of claimants have access to the internet, but this tends to be via a mobile device which does not lend itself to form filling. A survey conducted by the council found that only 2 per cent of people wanted online access to services.

London Borough of Lewisham
83 per cent of claimants said that they knew nothing about UC and the benefit cap. Out of 250 pilot users, 44 per cent were 'triaged' as either exempt, no longer affected by the benefit cap or not vulnerable, 50 per cent needed to be booked for face-to-face appointments, and 6 per cent placed on hold pending an interpreter being booked.

Melton Borough Council
A high percentage of claimants have internet access, but this is through devices such as mobile phones and therefore unsuitable for completing an online claim. Free or low cost internet access is needed in a variety of locations to meet claimants' demand; library sessions are inadequate in terms of both duration and availability.

North Lanarkshire Council
64 per cent of tenants are not confident about making up shortfalls in rent. The uptake for council tenants' group financial education sessions has been so low that this approach has been cancelled.

Rushcliffe Borough Council
There is still a lack of awareness that UC is coming and that it will bring changes for benefit claimants.

MidlandHR introduces self-service HR at Home Group

Home Group has been using iTrent, MidlandHR's HR and payroll system, since 2010 and has now just added the iTrent Employee and Manager Self-Service modules as part of its new HR strategy. The new modules will be used by 3,200 employees and 570 managers across Home Groups operations.

The self-service strategy involved the introduction of the iTrent Employee and Manager Self-Service modules, a web-based 'learning management system' and e-learning capabilities, a web-based intranet for HR-related information, and a telephony system delivered as a shared service.

Susan Coulson, director of HRD, Home Group said, "iTrent Self-Service would enable the team to channel resources into value-adding activities. This included the elimination of manually updating colleagues' personal details, manually processing absences and manually capturing learning and development needs. It also avoided the need for duplication and creating unnecessary data entry errors."

The Employee Self-Service module enables Home Group's staff to view and update their own personal details, request a holiday, book a training course, link to e-learning products and access their payslips electronically. The Manager Self-Service module enables managers to maintain and update their team's data, with on-demand access to information about their employment details and development as well as absence history and holiday requests.

Coulson said, "Since implementing iTrent, we have demonstrably added more value as an HRD function. This is due to the visibility of robust data, which informs our decision making and helps us to challenge situations in line with our strategy.

"There has been a huge impact on the organisation and we now have more streamlined, efficient processes providing visibility and accountability. Overall, the project has enabled us to make savings of over £1 million."

The savings include a 25 per cent reduction in sick days, equating to just under £300,000 of savings, through better visibility and monitoring of employees absences, the identification of a large number of absence and salary overpayments, resulting in the successful recovery of £120,000, reducing the number of operational staff due to greater automation and more self-service to save £488,000, and an annual saving of £27,000 through the removal of printing and posting paper payslips and P60s for 3,800 employees, and £486,000 by cutting down on face-to-face training in favour of e-learning tools.

Workplace transformation & welfare reform

Jacqui Stoggall, Director of Consultancy, Sovereign Business Integration Group

Jacqui Stoggall, director of consultancy at Sovereign Business Integration Group, outlines the importance of workplace transformation to deliver the new strategic vision and mitigate risk in a challenging business environment.

From the introduction of universal credit to the decline in government funding, unreliable income streams are fast becoming one of the most critical issues within the housing sector. Yet this is not an issue that can be addressed in isolation. Housing providers need to manage this emerging financial model within a context of delivering social value, improving the service to tenants and facilitating changing models of housing provision.

New challenges

While the social housing sector is currently enjoying record levels of surplus, the longer term financial picture is less rosy. The combination of a reduction in local and central government funding with the expected rise in arrears following welfare reform – including both the 'bedroom tax' and universal credit - will not just dent income. Moving from a guaranteed income stream to one that is subject to far more variables fundamentally changes the nature of the business. And while some would argue that regulatory demands have reduced, organisations still need to demonstrate social value from investment and, critically, ensure the surplus is reinvested successfully to meet new and evolving demands.

Most notably, housing providers will be increasingly investing their own money in new housing stock, raising new demands and expectations for value. In addition, there is an on-going emphasis on the adoption of new tenure types, including the push towards more flexible ownership options and market rents.

Strategic vs. tactical

One of the greatest challenges, especially for smaller housing providers with limited internal resources, is prioritising initiatives. From the financial: how is the business going to manage the new financial challenges; gain visibility of the income trends; or raise finance for investment when some in the sector have lost the prized Triple-A status? To customer focus: how can housing providers also evolve services, to embrace channel shifting for example, via on-line customer portals; what involvement should they have in community led initiatives, such as apprenticeships and partnerships with local business to improve access to jobs; and how should they measure whether social value is demonstrated?

It is now essential to adopt a long-term perspective and to create a business vision that reflects an organisation's strategic priorities. However, to deliver tangible, measurable outcomes, from increasing long-term financial performance to improving customer service, there needs to be a radical change in approach. Rather than implementing individual, typically disparate, tactical projects with specific output expectations, organisations must take a more strategic view. Joining up a number of inter-related projects into a single, outcome-led programme will be key to realising the new objectives.

Business improvement programmes

What does this mean in practice? Rather than focus on a single output, such as initiatives to move tenants over to direct debits before the introduction of universal credit, a business improvement programme will encompass a range of projects, including direct debit migration, with the overall aim of improving cash flow, financial performance and control. In tandem with the direct debit project, the cross-organisational programme may include information gathering to determine the extent of the escalating rent arrears risk, as well as perhaps improving customer service training to deal with increasing tenant concerns regarding changes to their benefits and how they will manage their financial commitments.

By joining up such related projects under the umbrella of a single programme, an organisation addresses every aspect of the specific business issue or change in tandem. For example, flagging up the number of customers likely to be affected by universal credits and those without bank accounts delivers a better understanding of risk while actively moving towards imposing better control through the use of direct debits, and putting in place proactive service delivery to help tenants struggling to cope post-welfare reform helps to mitigate the risk.

It is this combination of projects under a single joined-up banner that can deliver the eventual outcome of improving the management of cash flow and rental income when universal credit is fully rolled out.

Effective transformation

So how can housing providers evolve from a project-led to a programme-led approach? Transformation in this way demands a strict methodology, such as the Managing Successful Programmes (MSP) guidelines which provide the discipline and rigid processes required to coordinate the management of related projects into a single, outcome-based model.

The programme needs to be tightly linked to the business plan and strategic objectives, as well as comply with governance; and it must have a clear vision describing how the future will look and this vision will need to be tied into a benefits-realisation model based on pre-determined measures of success.

The challenge for smaller organisations is to find the resource and expertise internally to manage a transformational programme that is likely to touch every department at some time but will, by its very nature, experience peaks and troughs in resource requirements.

Turning to an experienced third-party organisation not only overcomes the resourcing problems by delivering flexible access to a raft of skills but, critically, provides access to a depth of experience in managing similar issues with other housing providers. From helping to develop the strategic long-term vision to providing a helicopter view and peer reviews, external expertise can be key in determining and prioritising objectives and effectively managing a programme to deliver the required outcomes.

Conclusion

The challenges and opportunities facing housing providers over the next three years are compelling. From an escalating local focus to the expansion of services and the exploitation of digital technologies to improve both efficiency and the quality of the customer experience, housing providers have a vast array of opportunities to make fundamental operational changes. But none of these changes can be addressed in isolation, especially given the as-yet untested implications of welfare reform.

There must be a golden thread that links all of these individual objectives. Without a strategic focus and the ability to map a long-term vision with rigid programme management to ensure objectives are realised, how can any housing providers achieve both long-term financial security and improve the quality of the customer experience?

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

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Liquid Voice protects SitexOrbis lone workers with IVR & call recording

Call recording and contact centre specialist Liquid Voice has completed a successful IVR project for SitexOrbis, a provider of property and people protection services. As part of SitexOrbis' Code5 lone worker protection service, the project has integrated call recording, IVR, GPS, scheduling and incident handling to help the company's 24/7 response team provide rapid assistance to 14,500 lone workers.

Liquid Voice's call recording is constantly active across all monitored lone worker services and begins recording the moment either a call or silent alarm with open-mic is set off. The system allows operators to quickly play back elements with enhanced audio while the ongoing recording is unaffected. The new Liquid Voice IVR element allows lone workers to quickly record location information as well as set up a scheduled telephone call to check that the lone worker is safe.

Andy Birss, technical services manager for SitexOrbis' lone worker group, said, "Our systems are very bespoke and absolutely critical 24 hours a day, so when we decided to add IVR functionality,

we had a very tough criteria for selecting a technology partner. We have used Liquid Voice call recording for some time so it made sense that we talked to them first regarding the new IVR functionality.

"From our own internal design of how the automated IVR system needed to work, to us engaging with Liquid Voice and them helping with internal deployment took just four weeks. The system is now up and running and both elements have been flawless."

SitexOrbis is now migrating existing customers, such as Arena Homes and Gateshead Housing, onto the new systems.
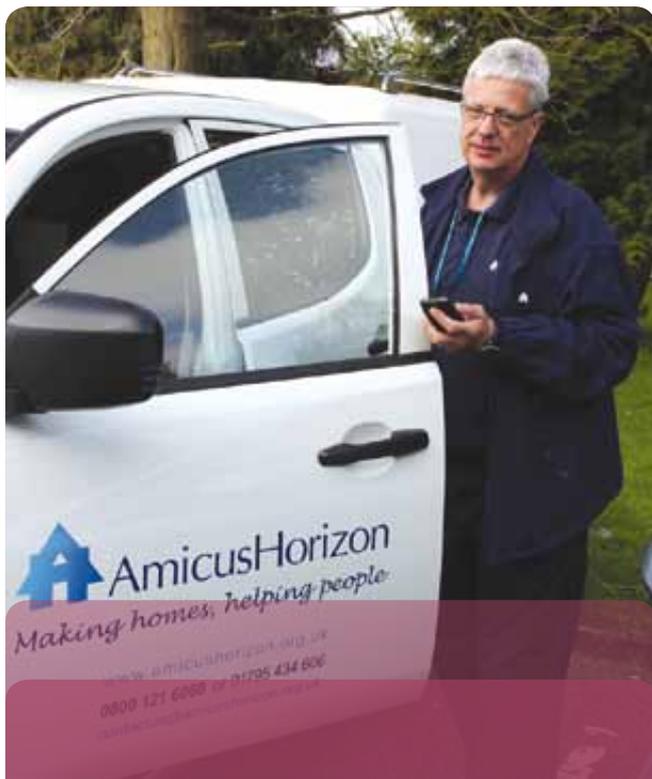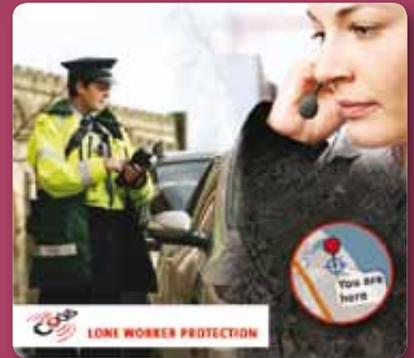
AmicusHorizon mobilises 350 workers with 1st Touch

AmicusHorizon has just signed an enterprise licence agreement for mobile workforce software from 1st Touch. The licence enables AmicusHorizon to access the full range of 1st Touch software modules as it mobilises all 350 front-line staff such as asset management inspectors, surveyors and housing officers.

1st Touch applications enable programming-free, user-customisable solutions to be created through an easy to use graphical interface, and are specifically designed to simplify handheld form design and data capture without the need for business process mapping. 1st Touch software is available on a variety of platforms including Windows Mobile, Apple and Android.

1st Touch was chosen by AmicusHorizon after its positive experience piloting the software in June 2011 to carry out health and safety checks and block inspections, as well as 1st Touch's ability to integrate with AmicusHorizon's line-of-business applications to improve service delivery and efficiency.

Jeanette Alfano, director of technology, AmicusHorizon, said, "We already had a good experience of working with 1st Touch and this gave us the confidence to deploy the system across the business to all of our front-line staff. By choosing an enterprise licence, we can access and deploy these as needed, plus we have the flexibility of the multi-platform option."

More recruitment at 1st Touch

1st Touch has added another five recruits to its expanding team, across sales, implementations and support.

John Fawcett has been appointed as a new business account manager for the south of England and Wales, joining from leading Microsoft reseller Ciber. Robert Vaughan joins 1st Touch as a project manager. He joins from Arqiva where he worked as an ITSM business analyst and was previously a systems analyst at Credit Agricole.

From First Wessex, Haider Kahn is now part of 1st Touch's support team, having also previously worked at the University of Portsmouth and Portsmouth City Council.

Simon Taylor joins the company as one of two new implementation consultants; he previously ran app developer Digital Iridium. The other implementation consultant is Chris Bertrand, joining from skincare and cosmetics company Liz Earle Beauty.

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Real Asset Management

The road to true mobility

Mat Ashmore, Head of ICT, North Lincolnshire Homes

Mat Ashmore, head of ICT at North Lincolnshire Homes explains about how making the workforce truly mobile has revolutionised the way staff work.

By using technology, we have been able to create a virtual world where people can work from wherever they are, removing the need to be office-based full-time but still being in contact with what's happening across the organisation.

Traditionally, people came to work and spent hours behind their desk, but those days are gone. We want people to have the freedom to work wherever is convenient to them, based on the demands of their job. No matter your location, as long as there is internet connectivity, North Lincolnshire Homes' staff can work from anywhere, exactly as if they were in an office.

Desktop transformation
So how have we done it? Citrix XenApp and XenDesktop have transformed traditional desktop and application delivery methods, and connectivity from the outside world has been secured by SMS Passcode with two-tier authentication.

We are unique in the fact our customer advisors are now using Cisco IP Communicator via the Citrix environment for true mobility between our two call centres and any other location which meets their particular needs.

We chose IGEL thin clients to replace desktop PCs, which has resulted in huge cost savings through energy efficiency, reliability and systems availability. Using a bespoke smart card, we have incorporated secure printing, door security and access to the IGELs. In addition, the ID cards are more than just about a face; they are personal to the individual with their preferences securely stored on the card.

iPad responsive repairs
Digital inclusion is a top priority not only for our tenants, but also for our own front-line staff who traditionally wouldn't have had access to a computer. This is where mobile working software from 1st Touch comes in. We are proud to be the first housing association to deploy a responsive repair module from 1st Touch via iPads.

iPads are being used for more than their day-to-day jobs. Responsive repairs staff can now access the corporate intranet, send and receive email, use their calendars, and join social media – all things that the other staff take for granted.

We want our tenants to feel comfortable when dealing with our staff, especially when they are visiting people in their homes, so by using devices as agile as iPads we are removing the barriers that can be created by books, folders and ruggedised laptops.

Mobile device management
Security is always paramount to any mobile working strategy. We are using XenMobile as our mobile device management system which allows us to globally send updated applications and security settings, along with being able to wipe company data when any device is reported as lost or stolen.

The Citrix infrastructure cost us around £130,000 and was installed last year during a phased implementation. The 1st Touch mobile working solution cost in the region of £95,000 and went live in May 2013 after a three month implementation.

The future of working is going to be dominated by mobility, and with our technology we have future-proofed ourselves to make the mobile experience a personal one rather than a 'one solution fits all' approach. Our next step is to improve mobile working further throughout the business and create solutions which are not restrictive and are open to a variety of devices.

Mat Ashmore is the head of ICT at North Lincolnshire Homes.

Free NDL mobile survey applications from Medway Council

Users of NDL's awiMX mobile development platform can now tap into an extensive library of property survey applications developed specifically for housing providers and local councils.

Developed for Medway Council by Blue Diamond Internet Systems, the library currently comprises ten survey types. Existing surveys can be quickly tailored to local requirements and new ones easily created by non-technical users.

Designed to run primarily on Android devices, the mobile surveys can also be adapted for Windows tablet, iOS and Blackberry. Completed surveys are uploaded from the field when a connection is available and stored for checking

and transfer to the corporate housing management system.

Medway has now made the entire property survey set and supporting framework freely available through the NDL user forum, embracing the ethos that applications developed in MX are freely shared between its users.

Adam Fielder from Medway Council said, "Like most other social landlords, we were faced with the challenge of paper-based forms and their inherent logistics, security, transcription and data entry issues. Blue Diamond Internet Services has done an excellent job with the surveys and we are happy to share this with the

awiMX community as a whole. I hope that any improvements or new surveys will be distributed in the same way."

Russell Hancock, owner, Blue Diamond Internet Systems, said, "Like all solution providers, our developers hate to re-invent the wheel. By doing this work in an open and structured way, we have not only exceeded Medway's brief, but also created something with a much broader appeal. Survey work applies to many parts of most organisations and with a little fine-tuning, this framework can be used in almost any survey situation."

Vale of Aylesbury workers safer with Connexion2

Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust is the first to adopt Connexion2's Identicom Series 8 lone worker devices. The new devices are in the form of an ID badge and enable staff working in potentially dangerous situations or locations to discreetly raise an alarm if needed.

The Identicom devices were bought as part of the company's SoloProtect package which includes the device itself, 24/7 monitoring, SIM card and mobile network usage, device training and monthly reporting.

VAHT now has 130 Identicom devices for a range of employees who work continuously alone, as well as those who occasionally work alone, including the letting, rents, welfare and facilities teams.

The devices have automatic 'man down' detection for any of VAHT's workers facing environmental risks, such as electricians, plumbers, roofers, ground workers and caretakers. The devices are also configurable for either one or two-way audio, allowing Identicom's alarm receiving centre to communicate directly with the user. GPS technology in the devices also enables the alarm receiving centre to quickly pinpoint the location of the worker.

Leslie Goodman, facilities manager, Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust, said, "Conexion2's Identicom devices are not only less expensive than our previous system, but we also get management support through SoloProtect."

Calico Group signs with Connexion2
Connexion2 has also supplied 150 Identicom devices to Calico Group, including a number of units with 'Man Down' detection, again as part of the company's SoloProtect package.

Calico previously used mobile phones, combined with an emergency code, to raise an alarm should a lone worker feel threatened, but these were cumbersome and unreliable. In addition, the alerts were sent to Calico's head office and if key people were in a meeting or out of the office, there was a chance that the alert would be unnoticed for some time.

Kerry Tattersall, health and safety manager, Calico Group, said, "We invited six companies to pitch for the business and then short-listed two companies' devices to trial. Our staff thought that the Identicom device was fabulous and reported that it was a million times better than their previous system."

ISG's Sharepoint at Golden Gates

ISG Technology has completed the installation of a Microsoft Sharepoint 2010 intranet and extranet at Golden Gates Housing Trust. The project was completed in August after a three month implementation.

Golden Gates Housing Trust was formed in 2010 when it took over almost 9,000 properties from Warrington Borough Council. The additional workload to manage the newly-transferred properties meant that Golden Gates' existing systems and processes were being considerably strained.

GGHT had a DotNetNuke open source intranet but it couldn't cope with the housing provider's growing requirements, such as removing the disparate processes that were preventing its departments, teams and individuals from working together or sharing information.

Golden Gates wanted to bring all of its data together onto a single platform to streamline processes and make it easier for its staff to communicate and collaborate.

ISG Technology applied a scalable solution using SharePoint 2010, allowing both Golden Gates' staff and external contractors to access, update and share data and documents in a secure, controlled and easy-to-use manner. Improved workflow processes were also introduced using SharePoint.

Steve Lamb, head of ICT and business process re-engineering, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said, "ISG Technology provided extensive advice and ideas to ensure our SharePoint 2010 intranet was customised specifically for our needs. SharePoint 2010 has revolutionised how we communicate internally, share documents and information, manage tasks and handle processes using workflow."

The project included the deployment of a number of SharePoint features, such as Sites to provide a content structure for each department, team or project, Communities to stimulate communication and collaboration, Search for intelligent and instant access to information, Document Libraries for version control and permissions, and My Sites for social networking and personal document storage.

Unlocking the power in resident databases

Alan Marshall, Managing Director, Arena Partnership

Tenant profiling, communications, preferences and participation is a recurring theme for many housing associations, RSLs and ALMOs.

With vast amounts of valuable information in housing providers' computer systems, harnessing the power that is contained within resident databases is key to the successful implementation and reporting of many of the wider housing initiatives being implemented today. Accessing this information can also deliver real value and help transform businesses; the seven points below are key to achieving these goals:

1. Give front-line staff easy access to resident data: this means being able to log in from anywhere, look up records quickly, use simple on-screen analytical tools and get clear, relevant reports.

2. The available data should focus on what matters most: personal profiles, preferences and engagement histories; statistical analysis of feedback; programme inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact evaluations.

3. Profiling will help predict residents' behaviour and needs: diversity data is of limited use and standard household classifications may help, but you need to identify your own key drivers.

4. Target communications using residents' preferred methods of contact: this can save money and resources, avoid irritating tenants, and achieve a more effective response.

5. Target service delivery based on residents' needs: focus limited resources on where they will have the greatest impact.

6. Evaluate residents' feedback: gives valuable insight, demonstrates 'listening', and can (must) be used to determine priorities, measure progress and report back to stakeholders.

7. Monitoring support and other service interventions at personal and programme levels: essential for managing effectively, assessing the impact and evaluating the social return.

Alan Marshall is the managing director of Arena Partnership.

Newport City Homes gets Microsoft Dynamics with Goldcrest

Goldcrest Solutions, a specialist in Microsoft Dynamics CRM for the social housing sector, was chosen by Newport City Homes to enhance their existing Microsoft Dynamics CRM solution to cut the time it took to produce quarterly utility bills for residents.

All quarterly meter readings are now imported directly into Dynamics CRM along with any payment transactions from Newport City Homes' housing management system. Microsoft CRM then automatically calculates the cost of heating and hot water used and then produces the bill for each resident.

Alison Yandall, head of financial accounts, Newport City Homes, said, "This was previously a manual task that involved working from various spreadsheets in order to get the information loaded. We then had to manipulate the data to allow us to produce the bills."


Greenfields' DI plan with Montal

Working alongside Montal Computer Services, Greenfields Community Housing is installing thin-client terminals in the communal areas and wi-fi access throughout its sheltered housing schemes in order to encourage digital inclusion ahead of the government's 'digital by default' delivery of welfare reforms.

With training provided by Greenfields' in-house IT team, residents can use the web and email, make Skype calls, and access government services through a simplified, icon-based interface.

Perri Knott, ICT services manager, Greenfields Community Housing, said, "The installation of the terminals was simple. We set up new broadband lines for the communal areas and then configured the routers ourselves. We then liaised with Montal to install and test the terminals. We chose thin-client terminals instead of desktop PCs because the terminals were cheaper and more reliable, have much lower running costs, and are easier to manage and maintain."
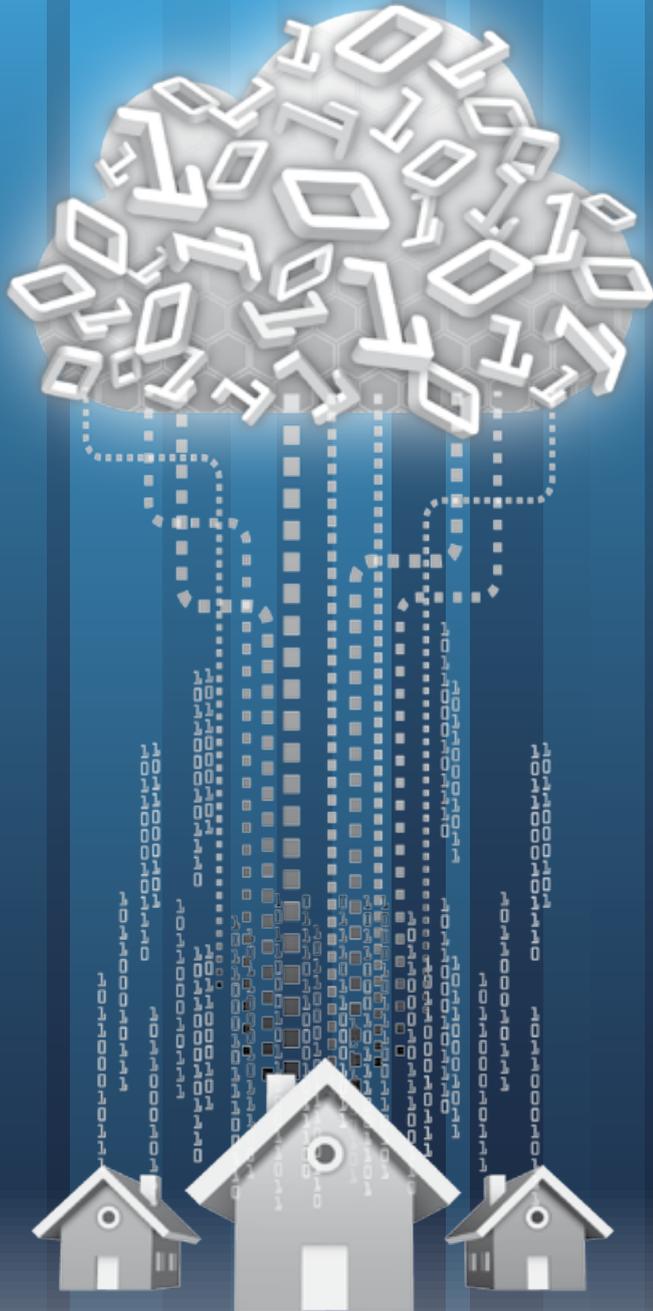
Futures Housing and Orchard – Conversations on customers' terms

Gavin Hitchcock, Head of ICT, Futures Housing Group

A project to harness the power of text messaging to engage better with residents has resulted in a housing group partnering with a software provider on a bespoke solution. Gavin Hitchcock, head of ICT at East Midlands-based Futures Housing Group explains how they did it.

Channel shift is a hot topic for housing providers. Moving customer contact from traditional routes such as letters, to digital alternatives such as text, promises cost-efficiency as well as more opportunities to collect meaningful data. Yet too often getting the internal buy-in and resources to achieve such a shift is difficult.

However, we had in-depth research on tenants' communications preferences which gave us a clear mandate for the change. We worked with the University of Derby on a piece of research which showed that 60 per cent of our customers, around 5,000 people, were willing to use mobile-based communications.

No one was surprised that tapping into people's use of their mobiles was the right thing to do, but it gave us a clear evidence base and challenged some stereotypes. Indeed, the research used generation theory to demonstrate how the life experiences of different age groups would determine their openness to new technology.

Instead of offering a stereotypical divide between 'young' and 'old', the data showed Futures' 'baby boomer' residents, aged 47-65 years old, had a higher than average percentage mobile phone ownership and were favourable to this communication route.

Income and repairs

Armed with this research, we chose the operational areas of income and responsive repairs on which to focus the initial roll-out of an automated SMS system.

Responsive repairs is probably one of the more transaction-intensive services we offer so there was a lot of scope for adding value by streamlining customer contact, and we chose to work with the income team because Welfare Reform has increased their need for timely communication and we saw text messaging as a way to 'pull' communication from customers, as well as 'push' information out to them.

Orchard worked with us to develop a text messaging system which will now be made available to other Orchard customers. Co-developing with Orchard benefitted both organisations; Orchard could draw on our insight into how customers might interact with the system and we could develop functionality to completely meet our needs. It's a value for money approach which we would happily use again.

Gavin Hitchcock's key tips

Do your research
A clear rationale from customer insight will mean you don't have to keep justifying your project; forget the forgone conclusions and find out what people want.

Get the business on board
This wasn't an ICT project, it was business-wide. Don't underestimate the benefit of early buy-in from colleagues and guide them through your scheme.

Embrace the learning
This was a chance to try new project management techniques and it paid off, so don't be scared to try something new on a high-profile scheme.

Talk to your suppliers
Why buy off the shelf if you can get your suppliers to help you create a solution to meet your needs? Bespoke can mean greater value for money.

Share what you've done
Our input into Orchard's product means it will suit many of our peers and we're looking forward to benefitting from their feedback.

The development process began in 2012 and the responsive repairs text service went live this May, with income to follow later this month.

Testing for success

We took on a dedicated project manger to ensure that deadlines were met and to implement an 'agile' software development framework. This framework ensures end-users have a say in every stage of development rather than just being presented with a finished product. We wanted their expertise so they could vouch for how the system would work in practice and we needed their support for the changes. At the same time, our research meant that colleagues understood that we can't just use the same communications channels for everyone and that we need to future-proof the way we talk to customers.

Our ICT team used the project management technique of 'time-boxing' to segment milestones in the development. Each time a 'time-box' was completed, there was a 'show and tell' session with either the income or repairs teams so they could test the functionality and provide feedback. In many instances, this meant the system could exceed the initial brief, as additions and improvements could be made along the way.

For example, it was identified that an automated text should be set up for when a member of staff attended a repair appointment and no one was home. This would allow the customer to reply in real-time to a text prompt, stating whether they still needed the repair and offering the chance to reschedule. Comparable to the way private companies use text to arrange goods delivery, this aims to reduce waiting times for appointments and avoid unnecessary correspondence.

Furthermore, in developing text messaging for the income team's use, the project has ensured the functionality fits with the organisation's aim to empower people to manage their money. For example, residents

Futures Housing and Orchard - Conversations on customers' terms

Continued from previous page

can send a short text message to request a balance on rent owed or to request a call from the team if they are facing arrears.

Stakeholders within the business were invited to weekly meetings to keep them up to date with the project's development. Resident panels were also engaged to trial some aspects of functionality, such as the wording and format of texts.

Analysis ready

Early data from the use of text messaging for responsive repairs suggests it is already reducing wasted appointments. A similar evaluation is planned following the income module's launch.

Aidan Dunphy, head of product strategy at Orchard, said, "We work in agile partnerships with front-line practitioners when designing new products, and Futures Housing Group gave us the real-world insight we needed to ensure Orchard Housing Messaging delivers strategic benefits. We are excited about continuing our partnership with Futures to expand the project into other business areas and to explore other access channels."

We're naturally very proud of this project which has made our fledgling text messaging system into an integrated communications solution. It will allow us to improve customer interaction and carry out in-depth analysis. For example, we can

capture customer satisfaction with repairs, audit when appointments are wasted, and analyse when customers make contact about arrears.

Gavin Hitchcock is head of ICT at Futures Housing Group.

Post Office's walk-in service for digital inclusion

Post Office branches now offer a free service where counter staff can print the nearest internet access points to customers' homes.

The Post Office, Online Centre Foundation and other partners have for the first time brought together the information about internet courses across the UK to create a single database.

11,800 Post Office branches can now link to that system, insert a postcode into their registers and print the nearest five addresses of free or low cost internet access and training points.

Paula Vennells, chief executive, Post Office, said, "There are millions of people who are missing out on the benefits of being online. Our 'Get Connected' campaign, which is part of our commitment to the charity Go ON UK, is an exciting development where people who don't have access to the internet will be able to find a facility to get online."

The internet points range from libraries to business centres, and provide either training or simple access. 99 per cent of people live within three miles of their nearest Post Office outlet, with 93 per cent within a mile.

The Post Office has been instrumental in helping create this first national database of over 5,000 online centres and access points. The national database is managed by Online Centres Foundation, working closely with the Post Office and other organisations to collate the learning centre information.

Other partners contributing venue information to the database alongside UK online centres are the Scottish Library and Information Council, the Welsh government's Communities 2.0 digital inclusion programme, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Libraries NI, and Go ON NI.

Isos Housing selects Optevia for CRM

Isos Housing has chosen Optevia to implement a new CRM system across its operations. Based on Microsoft Dynamics CRM, the Optevia will enable Isos to capture resident activity and manage all interactions with its tenants.

Chrissie Anderson, CRM project manager, Isos Housing, said: "In order to deliver an exceptional customer experience with a diverse range of innovative services, we realised that we needed a new CRM system that would provide a front-office application with an integrated single view of our customer database, allowing our staff to capture all exchanges with each resident, providing a full audit trail of interactions. Customers will be able to access our services and get things done, no matter whom they speak to."

The new system will use Optevia's social housing templates and will be integrated into SharePoint and Capita OpenHousing. The CRM system will also enable Isos to deal with the effects of issues such as the 'bedroom tax' through quick and accurate communications with those tenants affected.

Anderson said, "This is a great opportunity to make our jobs easier and continuously improve our services, whether it's letting a property, dealing with anti-social behaviour or taking a call about our planned maintenance programme. By aggregating all of this customer information onto one platform, we can really become customer-centric and create a full 360-degree view of our customers."

CHP links Omfax's Keyfax with Microsoft Dynamics

CHP is using Microsoft Dynamics CRM to improve how it uses its existing Keyfax Enquiries call-scripting software from Omfax Systems for call handling and business intelligence.

CHP has used Keyfax intelligent call-scripting for 10 years and is an established IT part of the repairs process. The scripting gives CHP's customer service advisors a knowledge base which incorporates expert input from technical and social housing specialists. The advisors enter keywords and search terms into Keyfax, and the intelligent scripts guide the advisor to and through the most relevant solution.

When CHP chose to extend Keyfax beyond just repairs, it identified 20 key success criteria that the integration of Dynamics CRM with Keyfax should achieve. These included embedding CHP's customer service excellence principles, increasing the number of calls dealt with at the first point of contact, managing calls that directly resulted in a task, and raising customer satisfaction.

James Dickman, project manager, CHP, said, "The implementation of Microsoft Dynamics CRM as part of the Keyfax Enquiries project has given us an opportunity to see the huge potential in using Dynamics CRM. It is early days, but Dynamics CRM is already giving additional intelligence on our customers and helping to improve services."

Omfax partnered with Caltech IT, CRM experts and a Microsoft 'Silver' partner for Dynamics CRM, who worked with CHP and Omfax to integrate and customise Dynamics CRM with Keyfax. CHP retained the familiarity of Keyfax and benefitted from the ease of use of Dynamics CRM through Outlook.

Integrating Keyfax and Dynamics CRM provided a comprehensive view of properties and residents, while ensuring the quality of calls through the scripting, in a single easy to use system. For example, when a tenant calls to report an instance of anti-social behaviour, the advisor follows the ASB script and that information interacts with Dynamics CRM, which in turn uses workflows to generate tasks and correspondence.

Darrell Scott, systems project analyst, CHP, said, "The first phase of the CRM project has given us the ability to record all contact with our residential and business contacts. We have been able to produce detailed reports on these communications so that we can measure demand and identify areas that could be streamlined.

"The use of CRM through Outlook has made it very easy to use for CHP's staff as Outlook is a familiar everyday application."

CHP has now employed a scripting specialist, and within the next few weeks it will have Dynamics CRM and scripts installed in all of its customer facing sites, head office and community hub.

Big data getting bigger

'Big data' is everywhere these days, even making it onto the agenda of the recent G8 political summit. Housing Technology interviewed a selection of people with an interest in big data to share their view on how big data can be applied to housing providers' operations.

First of all, what is big data? Most people have some understanding of the concept in their own minds but might struggle to explain it if they were asked to define big data. Wiley's recently-published 'Big Data for Dummies' (reviewed on the opposite page) defines big data as any data source that has at least three shared characteristics: extremely large volumes of data, extremely high velocities of data and extremely wide varieties of data.

Chris Coan, managing director of Visualmetrics, said, "Big data is a big bucket – start with video, audio, text, machine, structured, and unstructured data. Combine those in massive volumes with tremendous variety, and you get complexity. The challenge then is how to corral and mine the information to create new opportunities. Therefore the only value of big data is the ability to collect, distribute and analyse the information found within, in a timely manner and with automated processes."

Continuing the theme of the value of the data, David Mitton, director of Liberata, added, "I like the introductory paragraph of the Wikipedia definition: 'big data is a collection of data sets so large and complex that it becomes difficult to process'. However, I would extend that to cover all data, big or otherwise, that is difficult to process because if you are unable to make sense of it then it has little value."

Fad or here to stay?
A couple of years ago, big data could have been dismissed as a passing technology fad or at least only applicable to the largest and most technically advanced global companies. However, like cloud computing, big data has shaken off criticisms of marketing hype and become almost a mainstream technology.

> "Big data enables you to 'mash' many sources of data, far beyond those produced by existing systems."
>
> David Hall, Senior Associate, Anthony Collins Solicitors

Glen Lewis, UK housing sector manager at Northgate Public Services, said, "The term 'big data' may come and go, but the availability of vast amounts of information to organisations and individuals is here to stay. The market for analysing big data is growing rapidly and will continue to innovate and develop over the coming years. We expect to see companies with specialist knowledge of particular datasets emerge as organisations try to make their key business decisions more data-driven."

David Hall, a senior associate at Anthony Collins Solicitors, added, "Only time will tell if big data has staying power, but ultimately, the answer to the 'fad' question will depend on how much your organisation already uses business intelligence, and whether your vision and objectives demand more of what big data has to offer. It would be great to see the sector challenging its suppliers to improve their services by making judicious use of big data."

Why big data for business?
When asked about the business drivers behind the adoption of big data, Paul Rowley, head of information services at Havebury Housing Partnership put it very succinctly, "It's simple. There is a single business driver – better decision making."

Dr Andy Murray, chief technical officer of Mutiny Technology, said, "If you can gather intelligence from all of your applications and channels by collecting and analysing the big data that they produce, you can track your users or customers' behaviour and their real-time data access requirements. Thus, from understanding how these systems are interacting, an organisation can design better and more cost-effective business services."

Mitton from Liberata added, "Current trends and technology, in the form of social media monitoring, tap into the growing use of social networks and around all sorts of formal and informal communications. This element of big data provides a window into local and national mass opinions, issues, subjects and sentiments. Used correctly, this data can be interpreted and used as a means to deliver positive changes and responses to very current issues."

This view was shared by Northgate's Lewis who said, "A key driver is the desire to improve outcomes by providing better, more tailored and customer-appropriate services, while reducing operating costs. A better understanding of the patterns and trends within communities and populations

> "It's simple. There is a single business driver – better decision making."
>
> Paul Rowley, Head of Information Services, Havebury Housing Partnership

can help to identify groups at risk and their associated risks and also monitor the effectiveness of intervention."

Technology factors
Big data is not a standalone technological development; it's the combination of the last 50 years of technology evolution and data management techniques. Furthermore, big data is already part of a wider technology trend, known as SMAC as it comprises social, mobile, analytics and cloud.

Stewart Townsend, business development director at Zendesk, said, "Technology is always changing and in most cases, big data is the remodelling of a data warehouse, and depending on the requirements, it means either a Hadoop infrastructure for rapid large-volume, multi-threaded tasks or overnight batch-process runs that drive an old style business intelligence tool like Cognos."

> "Current trends and technology, in the form of social media monitoring, tap into the growing use of social networks and around all sorts of formal and informal communications."
>
> David Mitton, Director, Liberata

Rowley from Havebury Housing Partnership explained, "The technology drivers are easily appreciated with increases in data availability, better interfacing with external data sets through web services and XML, and social media and geographical information creating huge varieties of data. To take advantage of all this, we now have the cheap storage, 'No-SQL' database products, scalability and maturity that is required to analyse huge amounts of disparate data."

Lewis added, "The technology drivers come from an explosion in data sources and the volumes of data being created, in tandem with the advent of web-scale data analytics, allowing companies to process high volumes of real-time, unstructured data."

Big data in housing
To date, big data has tended to be associated with financial services, retailing and consumer products, pharmaceuticals and utilities; central and local government and housing providers have been slower to adopt big data but as they become more focused on using business intelligence for better decision making, that situation may change. Mutiny Technology's Murray explained, "There are a number of new applications that can now aggregate and index big data in real time. This enables faster analysis, intelligent search tools and easy-to-understand reporting of the results."

Big data getting bigger

Continued from opposite page

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>
> Dr Andy Murray, Chief Technical Officer, Mutiny Technology

Hall from Anthony Collins Solicitors, said, "Housing providers who are already looking for sophisticated business intelligence will benefit significantly from big data as it enables more flexible and sophisticated analytics. Big data technologies enable you to 'mash' many sources of data, far beyond those produced by existing systems such as the CRM, finance, HR, housing management, maintenance and repair, and care service management applications."

Is big data right for you?
In its present guise, big data is a concept that most mid-size and large housing providers should be keeping an eye on, with a view to adoption as the technology matures and becomes more commoditised.

Taking a more optimistic position, Coan from Visualmetrics explained, "These technologies will allow housing providers to effectively manage the process of analysing large volumes of data instantly, resulting in satisfying the business needs in terms of real-time reporting. Big data technologies help reduce data silos and allow less complex integration and reporting processes, which ultimately increase the efficiency of the organisation."

> "The term 'big data' may come and go, but the availability of vast amounts of information to organisations and individuals is here to stay."
>
> Glen Lewis, UK Housing Sector Manager, Northgate Public Services

Havebury Housing's Rowley said, "We are not at the right point as a market sector to need big data, but if you want to look like the big boys and implement it, fine. However, what you must not do under any circumstances is to allow your infrastructure to become incapable of supporting big data when it becomes more widespread."

Lewis from Northgate added, "Without greater use of big data and the solutions to use it, it is unlikely that the social housing sector will continue to be able to deliver extended services within its communities and increase its ability to tackle the massive challenge that welfare reform brings."

Business intelligence vs. big data
Most housing providers have some form of business intelligence applications and processes, ranging from basic spreadsheets to full-blown, dedicated business intelligence systems. So, how does big data fit into the scheme of things?

Rowley from Havebury Housing said, "BI will tell you all the places you have void properties. Big data will tell you that those void properties are where people have tweeted about the lack of amenities and that the properties are all on streets with high gradients to get to the local school."

Zendesk's Townsend added, "Business intelligence and big data are interlinked. Big data relates to the collection and usage of data, while business intelligence, analytics and reporting enable housing providers to answer questions about the data itself."

Coan from Visualmetrics explained, "Big data is not replacing business intelligence; it's enhancing the need for it. With the right big data technologies and the right business intelligence tools, housing providers will be able to analyse data and discover trends that were impossible before."

Volume, velocity and variety
Relating to the 'Big Data for Dummies' book's definition of big data concerning extreme volumes, velocities and varieties of data, Havebury Housing's Rowley pointed out, "Don't forget the fourth 'V'; veracity. Do your staff trust what's in your big data system and what comes out of it? Does it stand up to challenge and audit? That is much more important."

Impact on existing technologies
Depending on your perspective, big data sits either above housing providers' existing applications or to one side of them; it is the means to the end, not the end in itself.

Rowley continued, "Big data itself has little impact on existing systems. It is the data held within either the housing provider's IT systems or its data warehouses that will be used in the big data system. However if you get big data, you should expect to collect more data faster and with greater variety. The real-time ideals of big data will rub very uncomfortably against the batch-style reporting technologies used in most housing IT systems."

> "Big data is a big bucket – start with video, audio, text, machine, structured, and unstructured data. Combine those in massive volumes with tremendous variety, and you get complexity."
>
> Chris Coan, Managing Director, Visualmetrics

Mutiny Technology's Murray concluded, "Gathering logs, aggregating the data, indexing, storage, searching and display all require systems integration and some dedicated hardware. Add to that investment in a full-time analyst and you can probably make something of big data in your organisation."

> "Big data relates to the collection and usage of data, while business intelligence, analytics and reporting enable housing providers to answer questions about the data itself."
>
> Stewart Townsend, Business Development Director, Zendesk

Conclusion
Housing Technology posits that big data is still a fairly 'extreme' area of technology for most housing providers, but it will become more mainstream and commoditised over the next 18-24 months and its relevance and affordability will trickle down from its current 'big ticket' status for sectors such as banking and retailing. Housing providers certainly shouldn't rule out big data and keep an eye on developments in this area. In the meantime, we would encourage readers to read 'Big Data for Dummies' for an independent view of what big data is all about.

Big Data for Dummies

Big Data for Dummies, Wiley, £21.99

If you are considering adopting big data or even already using it, we can strongly recommend getting hold of a copy of 'Big Data For Dummies'. Don't be put off by the title; it's not a watered-down summary for non-IT people.

It's written in the same open and approach-able style as the other books in the 'For Dummies' series and provides not only an excellent introduction to the concept of big data, but also takes you through the detailed technical aspects of big data and how it can be deployed for all types of organisations.

Another point in the book's favour is that because Big Data for Dummies isn't a white paper, or research report from an analyst company, business consultancy or technol-ogy supplier, it is spared the necessity to 'sell' you the benefits of big data and focuses instead on what big data is, how to 'do' big data, and the likely outcomes.

If you have even the smallest interest in big data, get hold of a copy – it will be £21.99 well spent.
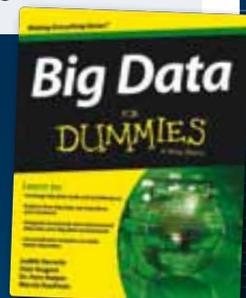
Metronet wins £500,000 deal with City West

City West Housing Trust has awarded Metronet a four-year contract for internet connectivity and wide-area networking. The contract began in May 2013 and is worth more than £500,000. City West's offices around Manchester will now be connected at speeds of between 100Mbps and 1Gbps using a combination of fibre and high-capacity wireless technology.

Martin Barber, assistant director of ICT, City West Housing Trust, said, "Following our move to a state-of-the-art, co-located datacentre near Manchester's Media City, we needed a reliable, forward-thinking partner to supply high-quality data links and through our procurement process Metronet blew away the competition."

Irwell Valley spends £100,000 with Metronet

Irwell Valley Housing Association has selected Metronet and its partner Central Network & Technologies (CNT) for the implementation of a new wide area network. The £100,000 contract began in February 2013 and will run for three years.

Metronet and CNT have rolled out a complete network refresh for Irwell Valley across 25 sites around Greater Manchester, including its head office, a disaster recovery site and a number of sheltered housing schemes.

The solution is based on a private MPLS network infrastructure for efficient inter-site communications and shared internet breakout. This will enable each site to access data from Irwell Valley's cloud-based infrastructure hosted at CNT's datacentre without the need for complex IPSec VPNs and within a shared corporate firewall.

Kate Rennicks, public sector manager, Metronet, said, "We are pleased to be providing services to another housing association through Central Networks & Technologies. This partnership will deliver a step change for Irwell Valley's end users, including improved speeds, better inter-site communications and greater flexibility."

Your Housing moves its network to MDNX

MDNX is now running Your Housing Group's wide area network across 60 sites in the north-west of England. The network will enable Your Housing to be more agile and flexible with its network through a 'carrier integrator' model, with the network being one of the first to be procured using the PSN Connectivity Framework Agreement. The contract was signed in October 2012 and the deployment was completed by May 2013.

Your Housing was formed in 2012 following the merger of the Harvest Housing and Arena Housing groups. After the merger, there was an immediate need to upgrade the wide area network for the Harvest Housing part of the group to accommodate a growth in staff numbers, cope with the additional complexity of the IT infrastructure and deliver greater network bandwidth.

The WAN comprises 60 sites covering a mixture of data centres, corporate offices, neighbourhood offices, smaller offices and home workers. It was particularly important for Your Housing that the contract and solution design was flexible enough to accommodate its changing requirements as it progressed through an IT consolidation project, as well as being able to support new applications such as VoIP.

Andrew Giles, ICT director, Your Housing Group, said, "We wanted a network that was able to provide us with the agility, scalability and resiliency to support our new initiatives. We have over 60 sites and often there are moves within the network from site to site, so we needed a provider that was capable of handling that requirement.

"MDNX planned and successfully completed the transition of the Your Housing contact centre to the new network recently, and we were impressed at how smoothly it went."

Through its core integration network MDNX is integrating connectivity from TalkTalk Business, BT, Virgin Media and Exponential-e to create a network that can scale as new technology emerges without Your Housing needing to be restricted to a single provider.

Exponential-e in with the G-Cloud

Exponential-e has just announced that it can now supply the UK public sector via the government's G-Cloud (iii) with a range of cloud services, including computing, storage, memory and online backup services.

The focus of the G-Cloud programme is to introduce cloud-based services into government departments, local authorities and the wider public sector. Through the government's CloudStore portal, housing providers, local and central government, and hospital trusts can buy innovative technology from approved suppliers.

Lee Wade, CEO, Exponential-e, said, "Our cloud services not only reduce software and hardware costs, but also reduce management time and are scalable for future development. The design of our cloud portfolio and our network provides the control, security and performance demanded by public sector organisations."

JMC IT supports merger of Harvest and Arena Housing

JMC IT has completed a large infrastructure implementation and application integration project for Your Housing Group, following its creation in 2012 from the merger of Harvest Housing Group with Arena Housing.

In 2010, JMC IT was commissioned by Harvest Housing to develop a new IT platform designed around its DemandIT system, replacing an outdated IT infrastructure with a much more efficient and centralised core IT system with integrated disaster recovery. This was combined with the delivery of a consistent desktop for application and data access to all users, regardless of location or device.

During Harvest Housing's tender process, JMC was the only IT partner to propose a blended environment of Citrix XenApp and Citrix XenDesktop to empower the hundreds of users in a variety of roles. JMC created a platform that was much more energy efficient than those put forward by other suppliers, required much less bandwidth and server power but delivered superior performance.

Simon Morris, executive director of resources, Your Housing Group, said, "What made JMC's proposal stand out was its blended design of application and desktop virtualisation. As the full dedicated virtual environment was only provided to those who need its added flexibility, we were able to minimise the background power."

The merger between Harvest Housing and Arena was announced a year later. JMC therefore had to extend the existing DemandIT platform while taking into account the likely future needs of the merged companies.

After the merger, JMC's DemandIT platform was immediately tested and its scalability proved when 500 new users started using the system. However, the growth capacity built in for the original Harvest Housing implementation was reached in a matter of months, not the five years that had been mutually agreed, so JMC designed a solution that would double capacity, yet build on what was already there. Finally, all of the data and more than 130 business applications used by Harvest Housing and Arena had to be migrated across to the DemandIT platform and the 1,200 users trained on the new systems.

Using the blended Citrix XenApp and XenDesktop virtual environment, Your Housing can now open new offices and operations centres in just a few days compared with the process taking weeks in the past. In addition, the housing provider has not only offset some of its costs by removing a £50,000 annual electricity bill by moving its hardware offsite, but also recovered additional office space.

Morris said, "JMC IT offered a solution that provided optimum return on investment when combined with disaster recovery and business continuity. Previously, our disaster recovery saw half of the kit sitting idle in case of an emergency, but now, we ensure all of our investment is fully utilised on a day-to-day basis while still providing us with the same level of back-up."

Your Housing now has a centralised system with improved group-wide communications and collaboration, the response teams have reliable applications so they can focus more on customers, and each office also benefits from common databases for better collaboration, reliable application access and systems that run twice as fast as before.

Trent & Dove goes virtual with Synapse360

Synapse360 has completed the roll out of a new virtualised infrastructure for Trent and Dove Housing, based on EMC's VSPEX reference architecture. The project began in November 2012, with the first phase completed in January 2013, with the infrastructure itself costing just under £100,000.

The EMC-based infrastructure replaces Trent and Dove's ageing server estate which was beginning to suffer from numerous hardware failures, slow performance from its Citrix desktops, and desktop and backup and disaster recovery processes that were taking too long.

John Imber, information systems manager, Trent & Dove Housing, said, "Some of our servers were up to seven years old and although we had partially virtualised our environment, we were still spending too much time maintaining the infrastructure and too little time helping the business address new challenges.

"We needed a high degree of reliability and performance, we wanted to reduce disaster recovery times from days to hours, we wanted something easy to manage and that could scale with us for five years without further significant investment, and it needed to offer great value for money. We were also constrained by the size of our server room."

John Imber, Information Systems Manager, Trent & Dove Housing

Synapse360 was chosen in 2012 to supply and implement Trent and Dove's new infrastructure, with the housing provider reporting that Synapse360 was the only supplier to propose a fully integrated solution.

VSPEX is an EMC reference architecture that combines server, network, virtualisation, storage and backup technologies in an infrastructure stack that enables businesses to transform their IT infrastructures quickly and simply. For Trent and Dove, Synapse360 specified Cisco UCS servers and networking, EMC VNX storage and Data Domain backup, and a VMware hypervisor.

Imber said, "One option was for us to build our own technology stack but there is always a risk that the components won't work well together. With VSPEX, EMC has already done all the hard work by testing and pre-validating every component in the solution in order to significantly reduce our risk. We migrated 20 servers in the first week and that was pretty painless.

"VSPEX requires much less management than our old infrastructure. It is simple to provision virtual machines and the auto-tiering facility means that we can be sure that we are optimising our storage capacity without constant intervention."

The integration of Data Domain has reduced Trent and Dove's reliance on tape for backup and recovery. Backup times have been significantly reduced using Data Domain's de-duplication technology and because it is fully integrated with the storage array, backup management is much simpler.

Imber said, "Resilience, performance, DR, scalability and management are all better with VSPEX, and we've slashed costs too."

GENERAL NEWS

Gentoo's Streetwise makes new business appointment

Bryan Healy, Business Development Manager, Gentoo Group

Streetwise, a commercial arm of Gentoo, has appointed Bryan Healy as its new business development manager to expand its operations in Scotland and the surrounding areas.

Originally developed by Gentoo, Streetwise is a commercially-available, web-based application for front line staff to monitor and track antisocial behaviour and other tenancy breaches.

Healy was previously a strategic advisor on antisocial behaviour at Glasgow Housing Association and has over 20 years' community safety experience. He will be responsible for growing the Streetwise business, as well as managing the sales and implementation processes.

Since Streetwise was launched as a commercial service in 2011, Glasgow Housing Association, North Tyneside Council, Glasgow Community and Safety Services, Greenfields Community Housing, Poplar Harca, Chelmer Housing Partnership and Freebridge Community Housing are now using Streetwise for ASB case management.

SimplyUnite's DI at Sheppard Trust

The Sheppard Trust, which provides housing support for elderly ladies, is using SimplyUnite software to encourage digital inclusion among residents in its sheltered housing schemes. SimplyUnite Gem is an easy to use software program that has been specially designed to enable people, regardless of their age or technical ability, to stay connected with friends and family.

Gem incorporates Skype, email and photo sharing and encourages them to pursue hobbies and interests online. With an emphasis on communication, engagement and a focus on wellbeing, Gem helps people feel confident when using the internet via intuitive and accessible buttons and a friendly support team.

![TotalMobile logo]

The TotalMobile App Platform helps housing organisations to improve working processes, enhance productivity and save money.

Work Smarter.
Be Better.

Reform IT 2013 – Housing Technology's new event

REFORM IT 2013
WELFARE REFORM
DIGITAL INCLUSION
IT & BUSINESS STRATEGY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
BT
ciber

Housing Technology returns to the outstanding BT Tower on Thursday 19 September for our new Reform IT 2013 one-day briefing on welfare reform and technology.

Reform IT 2013 will cover:
- **Universal credit & welfare reform –** Implementing new processes & systems, keeping arrears in check, profiling and educating tenants, training for frontline staff, and supporting multiple direct payment channels and variable payment cycles.
- **Digital inclusion –** Helping tenants to become 'digital by default' through education and training, IT partnerships and tenant communications across multiple channels.
- **Technology & business operations –** Increasing the role of IT within the business through integrated housing and financial management systems, more mobile working and BYOD, and support for diversified revenue streams.

ONE-DAY AGENDA

0900-1000 REGISTRATION, BREAKFAST AND NETWORKING	**1300-1530** LUNCH AT THE TOP OF THE BT TOWER
1000-1300 IT & BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS	**1600** CLOSE

Speakers *(topics subject to change)*

Affinity Sutton – *Phil Miles, director of regeneration & communities*
Why digital inclusion is important, how Affinity Sutton has used branding & communications to engage residents, and its DI programme with Digital Unite

Ashton Pioneer Homes – *Peter Marland, director of housing services*
The challenges of welfare reform and tenant engagement using social media
GreenSquare Group – Jenny Spoor, head of neighbourhoods
Greensquare's experience of the DWP's pilot projects and its preparations for universal credit
Orbit Housing – *David Leach, IT director*
Aligning technology, customer contact and digital platforms to create an integrated customer proposition
Origin Housing – *Philip Miles, director of regeneration & communities*
Origin's preparations for welfare reform and universal credit, mobile working and its pilot projects for digital inclusion
Wakefield & District Housing – *Geoff Kirk, service director & Louise Muirhead, senior business analyst*
An enterprise-wide mobile project to streamline operations for welfare reform
Yorkshire Housing – *Adam Stewart, head of customer services & Joanne Foster, Income services manager*
Yorkshire Housing's introduction of new processes and improving its customer offer in light of universal credit and welfare reform

The exclusive event will begin with registration and breakfast in the reception area of the BT Tower, followed by a small number of high-level presentations and a panel discussion in the BT auditorium. Guests will then take the high-speed lifts to the top of the BT Tower for a gourmet networking lunch with amazing views.

Registration, presentations and sponsors

Please see **www.housing-technology.com/reformit** for further details. If you are interested in speaking at Reform IT 2013 or would like to know about exhibiting and sponsorship, please email **events@housing-technology.com.**

Orchard reaps the benefit of its apprentices

Three young people who joined Orchard's apprenticeship scheme at the end of 2011 have each been offered permanent roles with the software provider. Housing Technology covered the start of Orchard's apprenticeship scheme in the January 2012 issue (page 4).

During their apprenticeships, Daniel Gilliland, Danielle Christer and Richard Aydon have gained valuable work experience as well as NVQ qualifications. Daniel is now helping Orchard's rapid application development (RAD) team as a technical assistant, Danielle is working on the service desk, and Richard within the ICT team.

Louise Crennell, HR manager, Orchard, said, "We believe that apprenticeships are a great way to find talented individuals looking to start their careers. To us it is all about finding bright people with a great attitude to work and learning. Following on from these successes, we will soon be looking for another apprentice to join the ICT team."

Orchard launched its scheme to employ the services of local talent for one year with the possibility of a longer term job when the scheme ended. Orchard's apprenticeship scheme is recognised by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS). According to NAS, apprenticeships bring 'considerable value to organisations, employers, individuals, and the economy'.

Alison Davis, operations director, Orchard, said, "We embarked on a similar scheme in 2005 which worked really well, resulting in one young man gaining a reputation as one of our most respected support specialists. Not everyone wants to go to university and we continue to offer our support to those who have the potential to thrive in our environment."

Housing Technology strongly encourages all companies in the social housing sector, whether they are housing providers, IT suppliers or consultancies, to follow Orchard's example and find out more about apprenticeships. Many businesses are now realising the enormous benefits that apprenticeships create, not only in terms of a highly skilled workforce, but also by boosting productivity and increasing staff retention.

Big data – Time to pool our resources?

Matt Leach, CEO, HACT

It's time the housing sector raised its game on data, creating its own shared big data resource, pooling data resources from across the sector for shared insights, data-led innovation and the development of new tools. But it shouldn't stop at existing sources of data, and if we're going to make the most if it, we need to look beyond the sector for groundbreaking expertise, argues Matt Leach, CEO of HACT.

Housing providers are data-driven businesses, collecting and harnessing large amounts of data on assets and residents as a core part of their business activities. It sits at the heart of business planning, customer service delivery and asset management. But as a sector, housing lags significantly behind other public services in realising the full potential offered by technology innovations around data management.

The value of data

In virtually every other aspect of our lives, whether its banking, shopping, health or leisure activities, data underpins the products and services we are offered. But poor data management practices, a lack of effective (and common) approaches to data sharing, a narrowness of ambition, and limited appreciations of the value of data as a business driver have stood in the way of customer insight and service innovation across the housing sector. This has stalled the widespread development of the sorts of data-driven tools that would be commonplace in other business sectors seeking to better understand and respond to the preferences, ambitions and behaviours of their customers, and to develop more efficient approaches to delivering more to their customers within tighter budgets.

There are some housing providers breaking new ground in thinking about how the sector can embrace technology-led business innovation: Midland Heart and Aster's use of GIS mapping; Bromford's social media focus; and Orbit's forthcoming reinvention of its approach to digital engagement. And while e-procurement platforms such as Fusion21 and Valueworks have a good track record for driving efficiency gains in housing, these are exceptions. In general, it would be hard to make a convincing case that housing has embraced the full potential of or generated significant value from the data it holds and collects.

Pooling resources

But the sector cannot make that leap on an organisation-by-organisation basis; a sector-wide approach is needed. While individual housing providers collect significant amounts of data on assets and tenants, even the largest providers have a customer base that is very small when compared to other data-rich businesses such as banks and supermarkets. If a similar scale of value to those sectors is sought from the data held by housing, it will need to come from the (managed and controlled) sharing of data across the sector, enabling insight to be generated from hundreds of thousands or millions of residents, assets and transactions.

It's time for the sector to take a big leap forward into the world of big data by establishing a common repository of housing data encompassing both data held by housing providers and wider sources of relevant open data, enabling insights into service delivery, business improvement and the development of a robust evidence based on the social value generated by housing providers' activities.

And it might provide the trigger for wider innovation. Mobile data, embedded connectivity and household sensor-based technology (including smart homes and the 'internet of things') have the potential to provide massive streams of new data for large-scale innovation. But that dynamic data is of greatest value when it can be analysed and interpreted in the context of the existing (mostly) static data on housing assets and tenant details, preferences and demographics.

The data economy

But if the housing sector is to make maximum use of the potential that is offered from big data technological innovation, it is going to have to look beyond its existing boundaries and embrace partnership with those defining the new 'data economy'. That is why we have been engaging with Microsoft to launch an initiative to push the boundaries of what can be achieved through sector-wide collaboration around data analytics and wider technology-based innovation.

Over the next few months, we are planning to recruit a vanguard of housing providers willing to collaborate in the creation of common data repository for the housing sector, and showcase and stretch the boundaries of what can be achieved using the power of data analytics.

Early outputs would include the piloting of work to identify what drives tenant satisfaction, and the identification of any causal relationships between other aspects of residents' housing experiences and reported wellbeing and social value.

Over time, the data could be used for more advanced approaches, including the development of predictive models that could allow housing providers to identify and pre-emptively respond to issues such as anti-social behaviour, maintenance and repairs and arrears, and identify other factors that affect tenant participation, engagement with worklessness and other community investment-related activities.

This insight would be open to the sector as a whole, enabling all housing providers to understand the benefits that might be gained from improving their own use of data.

Finally, it would provide a challenge to third-party technology providers of business analytics to demonstrate the value of their approaches to the understanding of housing data.

It's a radical proposal, and an exciting new partnership for the sector. But we believe it's needed if housing is to make the leap into the data economy.

Matt Leach is CEO of HACT.

Generating insight through big data… And how polyglot persistence can help

Michael Hausenblas, Chief Data Engineer, MapR EMEA

MapR's chief data engineer, Michael Hausenblas, looks at how organisations approach the task of generating insights and how emerging technologies can break the notion of one-hat-fits-all relational databases.

Do the following examples sound familiar? You set off in your car to the airport to catch a flight and run into road works on the motorway and get stuck in a huge traffic-jam; you're now late so you'll miss your flight. Or you head to the park in a t-shirt and shorts on a clear autumn day, and within hours, the rains starts coming down. Both situations are common and are the result of insufficient insight. A quick check of online traffic information would have prompted an alternate route to the airport, while a glance at an online weather report would have suggested a sweater for that trip to the park.

These mistakes are due to the same lack of underlying insight and hold true for data-driven business decisions. More often than not, I see businesses make bad decisions because they have no way of generating insight from the mass of data.

It would therefore be wise to employ a holistic approach to driving business decisions, based on the internal and external data you have at your disposal. Yet there are only a few multi-national companies I know of, including Google, who really 'walk their talk' and base their strategic and tactical decisions to a great extent on data. But how can housing providers do so, and what are the key factors to consider?

- **Data provenance –** For the entire data lifecycle, you need to know where your data came from, understand what processes the data has been through, identify who is responsible for the data, and finally track who has access to it.

- **Data immutability –** Do you keep the data in the rawest form possible, and do you never change the original data, but only derive views from it? And can you afford it?
- **Automation –** Assess how much of your data acquisition, cleansing, de-duplication, processing and transformation processes benefit from automation.
- **Business-driven –** You need to elicit clear and 'SMART' goals from the business so that you can prove the efficiency and effectiveness of your processes in enabling the business to make faster and better decisions.

To get through the checklist above, there are a number of hurdles that need to be overcome when it comes to managing and analysing data to generate insights. The analyst Martin Fowler coined the term 'polyglot persistence', which neatly gets to the heart of the problem.

He suggests that any decent-sized enterprise will have a variety of data storage technologies for different types of data. There will still be large amounts of it managed in relational databases, but increasingly we'll be first asking how we want to manipulate the data and only then working out which technology is best for analysing it.

Polyglot persistence

In a world of data, with most of it stored in databases, different technologies are designed to solve different problems. Using a single database engine for all requirements usually leads to non-performant solutions. Make no mistake, polyglot persistence as a 'meme' has a direct impact on how you design and implement solutions for large-scale data processing. Moreover, it will influence the way you think about the tools you deploy and how you generate insights. Rather

than the one-size-fits-all approach we've been used to implementing via the likes of Oracle and others over the past ten or more years, we should now consider using a tool belt approach. And, as an architect, it's up to you to select the right combination of tools for the tasks at hand. In many ways, the Hadoop ecosystem is designed to be that tool holder and offers many options.

What system you choose will depend on the types of data you're dealing with and the type of insight you are trying to gather.

For example, a customer's shopping basket vs. a financial transaction means different data sets and varying workloads. Is it a quick, key-driven look-up? Do you need to scan and aggregate data over many records? Do you have ad-hoc queries? Or do you have timed, repeated one-offs that run in batch mode? Is low-latency your primary concern? And of course, all the tooling should not only be available at scale, in the petabytes and beyond, but must be reliable and provide high performance.

The notion of polyglot persistence and its direct impact on generating insight and decision-making is a broad topic, but an important conversion that should form the basis of technology adoption. Distributions of Hadoop are already starting that process by providing a common framework to allow the best tool to work on the most relevant part of a problem while providing a common framework for analysis. One day, the majority of the platforms will hopefully be compatible with polyglot persistence, but the days of the big monolithic database as the only starting point for generating insights are definitely at an end.

Michael Hausenblas is the chief data engineer for MapR EMEA.

Bernicia opts for Intuitive & ProcessFlows for analytics & BI

Bernicia Group has implemented a visual analytics and business intelligence system from Intuitive Business Intelligence for better performance management. The Intuitive Dashboards system was installed by its partner ProcessFlows for around £25,000.

The BI system extracts key information from Bernicia's SQL databases for housing and CRM as well as from a number of spreadsheets, giving Bernicia's end-users graphical access to critical metrics and trends across housing, tenant profiling and employee statistics.

Intuitive Dashboards unites critical management information from existing disparate data sources and presents end-users with relevant information in a visually-engaging, interactive dashboard format. By delivering proactive alerts to potential variances and shortfalls, as well as highlighting trends, users can take action to maintain performance levels and maximise opportunities.

Gary Hind, head of IT, Bernicia Group, said, "It is imperative that we can monitor our performance accurately and focus on areas that need immediate attention. Previously, we gathered data from numerous databases and spreadsheets, but this was time-consuming to collate and present and made it difficult to achieve a consistent view of our performance.

"Using Intuitive Dashboards, we now have real-time access, giving us an accurate picture of where we are heading. The ability to review our historical performance, as well as visualising a forward-looking perspective, is extremely powerful for business planning."

The next phase of the project will see Intuitive Dashboards implemented over the housing provider's Oracle database for its contractor system and with its finance package. Bernicia also plans to implement dashboards to report on its data capture and document management systems, OnBase and Readsoft, also supplied by ProcessFlows.

John Harrison, IT governance and project manager, Bernicia Group, said, "Intuitive Dashboards is extremely straightforward to use, delivering customised, graphical views of our key information and allowing us to drill-down to analyse data more deeply with just a few clicks. We now have instant access to the key information required by our users to interpret and act on."

Housing Technology's 'Review of IT Suppliers 2013'

We will be serialising some of the highlights from our recent 'Review of IT Suppliers 2013' report over the next few issue, starting with the results for asset management, financial management, mobile working, and performance management and reporting. You can order the 'Review of IT Suppliers 2013' report now from **www.housing-technology.com/report.**

Overall, most technology suppliers were highly rated and in many cases, the difference in customer ratings between various suppliers was very small, and there were very few instances of outright poor performance. Our methodology for compiling the survey data and the subsequent depiction of the data in the charts below (and in the original report) was to present the data as unmediated as possible. The data and ratings in this report should therefore be used as a guide to how the technology suppliers covered in this report are rated by their customers, and not as an empirical ranking.

KEY
- FUNCTIONALITY
- VALUE FOR MONEY
- PROJECT MGMT & IMPLEMENTATION
- EASE OF INTEGRATION
- TECHNICAL SUPPORT & CUSTOMER SERVICE
- SUPPLIER WITH FEWER THAN 10 RESPONSES

Financial Management

Overall: Castle Computer Services (386/500)
Functionality: Castle Computer Services (80/100)
Value for money: Castle Computer Services (74/100)
Project management & implementation: Castle Computer Services (76/100)
Ease of integration: Orchard (75/100)
Technical support & customer service: Castle Computer Services (86/100)
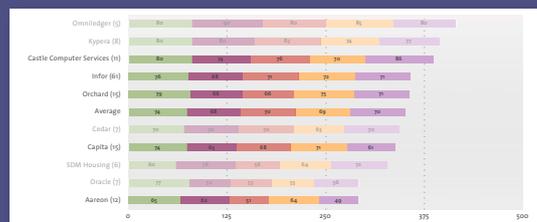
Performance Management and Reporting

Overall: Clearview Systems (385/500)
Functionality: Covalent Software (82/100)
Value for money: Clearview Systems & Covalent Software (both 72/100)
Project management & implementation: Clearview Systems & Covalent Software (both 80/100)
Ease of integration: Clearview Systems & SAP (both 71/100)
Technical support & customer service: Clearview Systems (83/100)
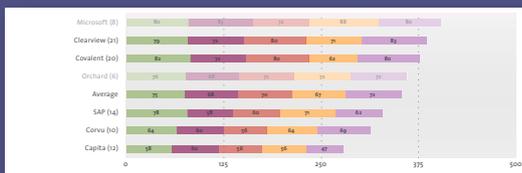
Mobile Working

Overall: South View Solutions (377/500)
Functionality: 1st Touch (84/100)
Value for money: South View Solutions (74/100)
Project management & implementation: Consilium (76/100)
Ease of integration: South View Solutions (82/100)
Technical support & customer service: South View Solutions (80/100)
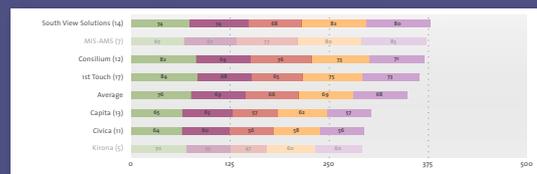
Asset Management

Overall: MIS-AMS (406/500)
Functionality: Keystone Asset Management & MIS-AMS (both 82/100)
Value for money: MIS-AMS (72/100)
Project management & implementation: MIS-AMS (80/100)
Ease of integration: MIS-AMS (84/100)
Technical support & customer service: MIS-AMS (88/100)
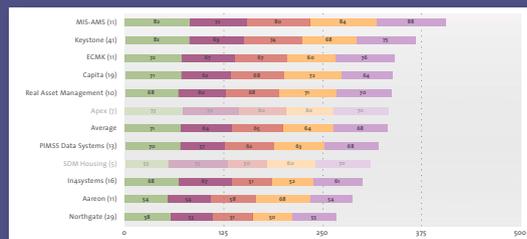
Survey and report methodology

This report is based on responses from over 230 people responsible for ICT within UK housing associations who completed an online survey between November 2012 and January 2013. The respondents were asked to rate the quality of their main supplier of various technologies. The ratings scale was as follows:
- 5: very good: meets over 90% of needs
- 4: good: meets 70-90% of needs
- 3: average: meets 50-70% of needs
- 2: below average: meets 30-50% of needs
- 1: poor: meets 10-30% of needs
- 0: very poor: meets less than 10% of needs

In each chart, the figure in brackets next to each supplier's name represents the number of responses received for that supplier within that technology area. The average ratings for each supplier in each technology area (such as housing management) and in each category (such as functionality) were calculated, with a minimum cut-off of at least five responses per supplier per technology area in order to make the results as representative as possible and to avoid statistical skew from the 'outliers'. In order to give additional weighting to suppliers with more responses, those with only 5-10 responses in a particular technology area have been 'greyed out' in the charts, alongside the text for each chart only referring to suppliers with more than 10 responses.

CIH launches new online learning service

The Chartered Institute of Housing is launching a new online learning service, based on its existing distance learning programmes to make gaining housing qualifications more interactive and interesting, and to make sure the qualifications continue to be relevant.

The new service features a streamlined suite of courses, updated course content and increased support for students, including more guidance from tutors. There will also be a new e-learning platform and more varied assessment methods, reducing the number of written assignments for many students.

The new service will get underway for all level three Certificate in Housing Practice students starting a course in September 2013, and will be rolled out to level four courses from March 2014.

Big data in housing

Richard Farrell, Chief Technology Officer, Netcall

Data collection has been a general practice for most companies ever since the first customers agreed to pass on their names and addresses with a purchase. This information was then stored in a database and used primarily to keep track of operations or forecast needs.

Today, both the sources and volume of the data collected have exploded, creating a remarkable asset that can lead to insights into products, services and customers. To keep up with the speed of the data revolution, organisations need to invest in the implementation of new processes, innovative technologies and governance mechanisms, allowing them to reuse and extract value from large volumes of information.

When it comes to the housing sector, the classic data processing pipeline – capturing operational data in large volumes, transforming it and accessing it – is still valid, but the kind of data captured, the amount that must be stored and the complexity of the processing and analysis required to digest it has changed dramatically. All in all, for the housing sector, embracing big data means moving away from physical documents in briefcases, from hundreds of copies of documents stored on laptops and desktops, from customer data received in standard formats placed in different systems and diving head first into the digital and mobile universes. Things are not as complicated as they seem and by following just a few simple steps, technology can become an organisation's greatest ally in dealing with the avalanche of information, from capturing, to storing, accessing, displaying and using it effectively.

Capturing

When it comes to capturing data, one of the key tips is to make sure that all areas of the customer profile are recorded. Everything can be captured in a digital format to create complete datasets that offer a full picture of each individual case by merging e-mails, multi-media (photos, videos, audio recordings), scanned documents and e-forms. New technologies have also helped in the development of smart applications that allow data capture at the sharp end, such as scanning from mobile phones, making it very easy for all parties to share documents and add them to customer folders.

An additional step that might make things a lot easier further down the big data path is validating the information against back-office systems to make sure it is correct.

An apparently simple error might interfere with accessing processes and could cause major issues. For example, a missing digit on a telephone number, an extra letter in an e-mail address, more than one postcode associated with the same customer – these can all lead to confusion and inefficiencies.

Storing and accessing

While capturing the information is an essential step, what happens to it once stored is just as important and all the benefits of the big data revolution might actually depend on the next steps: storing, accessing, displaying and using.

To allow easy access to all records at all times, a rigorous storing process needs to be established from the start, giving each file a tag or reference code that can be used to instantly reach the desired information. Regardless of the format it comes in (e-form, paper, video, audio, etc), all data related to one tenant should be digitised and archived appropriately, following the same process throughout the entire organisation.

By making sure that all employees in all departments are aware of the storing process, authorised staff will be able to find documents easily, at all times and from any location. With the wider adoption of mobile applications, the data can also be accessed by field agents during their meetings with tenants, making sure they are permanently up-to-date with all the latest information on each case.

In terms of accessing the data, profiling individual internal and external access to information is essential. Certain documents can be seen by certain staff and third parties at specific times, especially in sensitive areas such as housing where information on income figures or social behaviour issues shouldn't be openly available. Technology can therefore be used to apply different levels of security to documents.

Displaying and using

Providing a 360° view on a tenant that brings together all available information on one screen can be highly efficient in the housing sector. Complex IT systems and the spread of data across multiple archives can lead to lengthy processing of their information and therefore a slow customer service. A 'single view' solution can aggregate, visualise and manage data and documents from disparate systems on one interface, according to a set of pre-defined rules. This saves a lot of time as staff don't have to continuously switch between screens or transfer the same information to different back-office systems, each with its own operating processes. Faster resolution saves processing time, reduces the potential for errors and cuts down on training, as well as improves staff and customer satisfaction.

Going back to 'who can view what information', a role-based display of data can also be predefined, choosing even the format in which agents receive the documents. The urgency with which they can view new data varies as well, some having direct access to real-time changes, others having to wait for specific internal approvals.

With all the data captured, the possibilities to use it are endless. Having all the information in one place allows various stakeholders to query it and then be proactive regarding a variety of issues, such as policy and regulatory changes. Tenant data can also be queried by referring to all partners involved and then flagging and managing sensitive issues. At the same time, tenants can access and update the data themselves using online self-service portals.

A final thought: making big data work

Managing data by displaying and using it in effective ways can have a fundamental influence on any organisation. Many providers of data and document managing systems would claim that there are some recurring ideas around simple systems integration which by bringing data from various sources together, on to one display, would lead to various benefits such as reducing call-handling times. More advanced discussions with universal credit working groups have centred on using data to identify any deviation from normal payment behaviours. These open debates, which define a vision for the customer experience, should be encouraged and housing providers should definitely not be limited in their vision to what suppliers can deliver 'out of the box'.

With the impending challenges facing housing providers, the ability to bring together and interrogate all of the data collected over the years will be vitally important. Traditional document and record management solutions work on the premise that everything starts with a piece of paper. It is time to broaden that approach and bring together all communication methods, from voice calls to social media, and combine them into a single record which encompasses the complete customer interaction.

Richard Farrell is the chief technology officer at Netcall.

Getting a grip on data

Sir – The issue of data collection and data use for housing providers isn't a new one, but in light of the welfare reforms, not having a sound grasp on data could have a greater impact than before. It could also inhibit preventative measures being put in place that would not only protect tenants but also a housing provider's bottom line.

Housing providers need to know how to reach their tenants with reminders about rent payments, notifications of arrears and also offer services that will provide new income streams. However, as tenants hop between mobile providers and switch email accounts, this becomes increasingly difficult.

It may become necessary to ensure that contact details and any other necessary records, such as the names and ages of people living at an address, are reconfirmed at every point of engagement before further tasks are completed. This will help housing providers to deliver the right services, at the right price, via the right channel, at the right time and in a way that is most convenient to each individual. But with more data swimming around, it is essential that the supporting systems and software plug into each other so that updates only have to be made once and information can be shared and used on an enterprise-wide basis.

The challenge is trimming down the data, analysing the necessary bits and then making use of it. And one benefit of crunching down the data in the right way is that housing providers will be able to spot trends and patterns, such as with individuals, specific tenant groups or by location, and will be able to nip any problems in the bud before they escalate. This could help individual tenants to receive the support they need faster, which also avoids organisations making a larger investment in the provision of services than perhaps they needed to.

The focus, more than ever before, is on housing providers managing customer relationships. And in reality, the only way they can do that is by managing data.

Roger Birkinshaw
Director of housing, Capita's software services business

BI meets Big Data meets Cloud

Sir – We are finding that although many of our customers are sitting on the fence waiting for some clarity around the elusive concepts of 'big data' and 'business intelligence' (BI), many are eagerly trying to make sense of it all and tie these technology concepts into a concise IT roadmap.

Do the concepts of big data, BI and cloud computing collide, do they overlap or are they even related? In my view, it is certain that the drivers for big data and cloud adoption go hand-in-hand with BI.

BI drives the requirement for current and historical data, which often drives ever growing data repositories. BI also drives the demand for scalable and 'burstable' analysis and reporting infrastructures, which in turn drives the adoption for cloud technology.

However, it is worth reminding ourselves that a BI solution really should be about delivering the ability to gain better and more trustworthy knowledge in order to make faster and better-informed decisions.

Start your project with a quick reality-check – what reports and self-service features will be most valuable to your organisation? Identify the real questions and the real requirements to ensure your project is based on real business cases and real values.

Our advice is to go for pragmatic solutions using battle-tested Microsoft technology for BI as well as for managing large datasets and large volumes of data. For example, HDInsight, which is Microsoft's Apache-compatible Hadoop distribution, on Microsoft Azure is an excellent example of 'BI meets Big Data meets Cloud'.

For those people who have been drumming up a BI story for years, the technology is finally available and accessible to most organisations within a reasonable budget and it doesn't need to take a decade to get some value out of it either.

Gabriel Karawani
Director & co-founder, ClearPeople

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

Don't blame the intern

Sir – Today's successful housing provider thrives on its ability to attract and retain staff which fit its culture: agile, motivated and adaptable to change, from a diverse range of backgrounds. These organisations need to trust their employees and give them the freedom to work in the way that they choose, and a large part of this is allowing them to work using their own tablets and smartphones, a way of working largely attributed to 'generation Y' or 'digital natives'.

The major concern is that with the introduction of unmanaged applications in the workplace, using these devices brings with it major headaches for the housing provider's IT team. To cure these headaches, IT leaders need to identify where and from whom the network threats originate, and use this as a starting point to manage the network risks.

This is where research we've carried out across both public and private sector organisations revealed a surprising truth. Contrary to belief, it isn't necessarily interns and graduates who are providing a risk to corporate networks by working on their own tablets and smartphones, but more the C Suite, senior management and management. It makes sense; they are arguably more likely to have disposable income to spend on gadgets than recent graduates who may be saddled with debt.

IT and network managers can't police access to all the applications that are available on the multitude of devices crossing the network so they need to take a different approach. This should include a training programme to make sure employees know and understand the risks of working with their own devices, educating them on the steps to take so they can minimise any risk to the organisation's network. The focus should no longer be on only educating those coming in at an early career level, but should incorporate everyone in the organisation, whatever their level.

By maintaining a focus on educating staff across the organisation, only then can our IT leaders rest easily at night, and only then can we safely give staff the flexibility to work in a powerful and motivated way.

Alan Fogden
Head of public sector, Easynet

Welfare reform and BYOD

Sir – Reading last month's feature on the 'bring your own device' (BYOD) revolution, it's clear that the trend is here to stay. And while it has many benefits, such as convenience and flexibility to name just two, it's also important for employers not to let their staff get carried away without first implementing adequate security strategies.

Picture how a business was run a century ago, with all its confidential company data kept in a physical format and filed away. Then imagine every single member of staff selecting a file and carrying it around with them every day on public transport, at home, to restaurants and cafes. The risk of them dropping a single sheet of paper or of the entire file being stolen would be high. This is the same picture you should keep in mind when staff adopt BYOD to use their mobiles, tablets and home computers for work purposes.

As housing providers press ahead with flexible access strategies, they must remember that welfare reform means they are holding more confidential information than ever before. Tenants' bank details, medical history and family circumstances could be accessed at the click of a button. And when non-corporate devices are being used outside the main network of security firewalls, it's frighteningly easy for this data to fall into the wrong hands.

A solid security strategy that takes BYOD and flexible working into account can counter these risks while maintaining all the benefits. The housing industry is only just beginning its BYOD journey; now is the time to lay secure foundations.

Mark Summers
Head of technology sales & housing specialist, JMC IT

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

Security is key to successful BYOD

Sir – It's great that organisations of all sizes are taking advantage of a BYOD strategy and reaping the benefits of a more flexible workforce. A BYOD strategy can help relieve the headache of dealing with a huge amount of data and is therefore particularly beneficial for the housing sector and housing associations dealing with tenants and properties in a wide geographical area. However, it is important that your readers are fully aware of the host of risks and security issues associated with BYOD, as well as the options available in order to mitigate these.

The very nature of BYOD, allowing employees to access the company server through personal devices, leaves corporate data vulnerable and open to people outside the company, therefore jeopardising sensitive information. It is therefore imperative that companies considering BYOD make the security of the system a priority.

BYOD systems secured with personalised log-in details allow certain levels of access for different employees depending on their responsibilities. Guidelines and confidentiality agreements are also important, and should be clearly outlined and agreed with employees if they wish to connect their own device to the company server and work remotely.

Housing providers can benefit greatly from a BYOD system and the last issue of this magazine hopefully inspired companies to embrace remote working. However, I would urge anyone who is intending to deploy BYOD to ensure that security measures are embedded within the system at all levels in order to alleviate the risks and get the most out of their BYOD scheme.

Adam Jarvis
CEO, Intrinsic Technology