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TECHNOLOGY**
2014 | CONFERENCE AND
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HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2014

26-27 FEBRUARY 2014

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Editor's Notes

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Illuminating IT innovation

Twenty years ago while publishing directories of IT events just as PCs were becoming ubiquitous in every business, I posited the idea that for all the myriad courses covering IT productivity, time management, how to use the latest breed of desktop and business applications and so on, most companies would be better served if they sent all staff on typing courses. Glib? Perhaps, but at the time, most people had only basic typing skills.

Housing Technology believes that a similar situation exists today, but in a different context. Housing providers' ICT departments, for the most part, have a very good idea of the latest technologies and what they could do for their business operations, internally or externally. To a lesser extent, this is also probably true of most line-of-business roles, such as asset management or maintenance and repairs.

However, housing providers' boards of directors, investors and other senior stakeholders including the regulators often have a weaker grasp on how the latest technology trends, such as social media, mobile, big data analytics and cloud computing (see Editor's Notes in the July issue), could transform their operations beyond their wildest dreams.

We don't think this is down to a lack of interest on the part of senior management; they simply have many competing demands for their attention. Housing Technology therefore suggests that housing providers' ICT teams should set up internal programmes to showcase the very latest innovations (from the housing sector and beyond) to their senior management, not necessarily from the perspective of asking them to sign off budget for the latest 'whizz bang' but simply to illuminate the potential of IT beyond the narrow spotlight of their existing housing-specific infrastructures.

Omni-channels or omni-shambles

With multi-channel tenant communications high on most housing providers' agendas, don't miss our feature article on page 18 covering the benefits

and pitfalls of multi-channel communications, with comments and opinions from a number of experts on the subject.

Readers' letters

Eagle-eyed readers will notice that we haven't included a 'Letters to the Editor' section in this issue; this is partly due to a lack of editorial space and partly due to the impact of the summer holidays. However, Housing Technology encourages all readers to think about submitting a letter to the next issue.



You have complete freedom to choose the topic, as long as it relates to technology in social housing, and the tone (light-hearted, serious, contentious, praise, complaint, comment, enquiry, etc). As a rough guide, the word count should be around 150-300 words, and please email your letter to news@housing-technology.com (ideally with 'letter' in the subject line).

Bigger, better & longer!



Housing Technology 2014 returns to the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry on 26-27 February 2014 (see more on page 34). Building on the popularity of previous

events, we have extended Housing Technology 2014 to two days (with the option of attending either or both days) to allow more presentations, greater scope for networking and more time to visit the sponsor and exhibition area. There will also be a gala dinner on the evening of 26 February.

Online registration for Housing Technology 2014 will open towards the end of September. In the meantime, please email conference@housing-technology.com to either provisionally reserve your place as a delegate, put yourself forward as a potential speaker or find out about sponsorship and exhibiting.

FUTURE EVENTS

Housing Technology – Reform IT 2013
19 September 2013, BT Tower, London
www.housing-technology.com/reformit



SDS – Asset Management Seminar
24 October 2013, London
info@s-d-s.co.uk

Housing Technology – 'Beer & Pizza' Evening (Invitation only)
19 November 2013, London
events@housing-technology.com



Housing Technology 2014 conference & executive forum
26-27 February 2014, Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry
conference@housing-technology.com



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Orchard & Mosaic Island transform Catalyst Housing

Catalyst Housing has embarked on a major IT transformation programme with Orchard and Mosaic Island. The agile delivery methodology underpinning the project is working well, with several key milestones already achieved between April and June this year.

Like many housing providers, Catalyst found themselves with a myriad of applications and business processes accumulated over the years. As a result, tasks became more and more cumbersome to execute, management information slow to assemble and the applications difficult and costly to maintain.

Catalyst selected the Orchard housing management system as the platform on which to consolidate a number of legacy applications. A transformation programme called Diamond was established to migrate users and processes onto Orchard, allowing the legacy systems to be decommissioned as new features and functionality are released.

In order to get the most from its investment, Catalyst enlisted Mosaic Island, a specialist in information systems design, to assess the current architecture and recommend a delivery methodology. Using business capability modelling, Mosaic Island mapped the key business processes and produced a target architecture, a high-level programme plan and a risk analysis.

Mosaic Island led the programme at Catalyst's head office and established a proven agile delivery methodology. This connected the business user's needs with the technical implementation team and provided complete transparency and visibility to stakeholders while engaging Catalyst's in-house IT delivery team.

The key ingredients of the agile methodology are daily 'stand ups' (15 mins max), designated product owners from the business, clearly-articulated user stories and prioritised backlogs of work. The programme was divided into two-week sprints, at the end of which tangible results could be shown to stakeholders to ensure that the delivery team was on the right track. Even Catalyst's CEO, Rod Cahill, would occasionally attend the morning stand up meeting which gave him good visibility of progress and provided motivation for the delivery team.

Piece by piece, the Orchard platform was configured to meet Catalyst's business needs. The first release in April 2013 provided search capabilities across the extensive volume of data that had been migrated into Orchard from several legacy systems. It also included document management to associate scanned documents with the related tenant data.

A training programme designed by the in-house Catalyst team was rolled out and around 200 staff could then access tenant files electronically.

The second release in June 2013, covering rent accounting and arrears, provided business-critical functionality for core financial processes. This consolidated four different arrears processes across different regions into just one for the whole business.

The third release later in June saw the addition of functionality for ASB handling and a basic CRM dashboard. The Orchard platform was also integrated with the call-centre telephony system to allow incoming callers' records to automatically pop up onto agents' desktops.

The programme continues and some of the imminent milestones are improved CRM, voids and allocations, repairs, and bulk SMS/email messaging. By the middle of 2014, a number of legacy systems will also have been decommissioned.

Kevin Nichols, CIO, Catalyst Housing, said, "Catalyst now has a solid platform on which to grow our business in years to come. What's most impressive is how quickly the business embraced and adapted to change and created the opportunity for continued success."

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Trafford Housing consolidates IT services with Capita

Capita's software services business has won a seven-year contract to provide Trafford Housing Trust with its full OpenHousing software suite, which includes modules such as housing management and property development through to maintenance and asset management.

The contract will enable Trafford Housing to have a single repository for all data about its properties and customers, as well as providing more online self-service options, such as reporting repairs or paying rent, for its tenants.

Cath O'Neill, assistant Director for business support, Trafford Housing Trust, said, "Our staff currently have to use multiple systems to access different services. However, this will change

as we embark on a huge project to consolidate all of these into one easy-to-use portal. This will include our mobile, customer relationship management, repairs and maintenance, electronic document management and housing management systems."

Trafford Housing's fully integrated Capita system is expected to improve customer services and management of its housing stock, reduce unnecessary administration work, improve data accuracy and reduce IT support costs. Trafford Housing's tenants are expected to benefit from a new self-service customer portal and a choice of preferred communication channels.

Cloud-based property management software from Hexagon

Hexagon Software just launched a software-as-a-service (SaaS) version of its property management software, with its costs starting from £20 per user per month.

Designed to meet the needs of housing providers that don't have the necessary in-house infrastructure or resources to manage their own property management system, Hexagon's new service is available as a SaaS solution, providing 24/7 web-based access to enterprise-class housing and financial management applications at a low monthly cost.

The web-based dashboard functionality automatically delivers key management information and can be configured to provide high-level overviews of KPIs such as rent collections, net rental yields, average length of unexpired leases and occupancy rates.

Mitchell Hill, managing director, Hexagon Software, said, "This hosted service significantly reduces the total cost of ownership while enabling the delivery of administrative efficiencies and increased productivity. With monthly hosting costs from just £20 per user and no upfront costs, housing providers can quickly introduce flexible systems tailored to their individual requirements.

"As well as reducing capital costs, deploying a hosted solution will deliver greater access to business intelligence and workflow. It will strengthen business performance by eliminating the technicalities surrounding how information is delivered to users."

Aareon announces four new customers in Scotland

Barrhead Housing, Orkney Housing, Welso Housing and Williamsburgh Housing have all recently signed with Aareon for a mixture of its QL Housing and QL Financial software.

Barrhead Housing Association began its procurement process early in 2013 and chose QL

Housing and QL Financials. The implementation began in June 2013. Orkney Housing Association started a review of its systems towards the end of 2012, resulting in its selection of QL Housing & QL Financials.

Having reviewed the UK market at the end of

last year, Welso Housing Management decided to implement QL Housing. At the same time, Williamsburgh Housing Association chose QL Housing and QL Financials, with the implementation starting earlier this year.

FINANCE & ASSET MANAGEMENT

Housing Contact pilot reduces arrears at Adactus Housing

Adactus Housing Group began a trial last month of an automated text and voice service from the Housing Contact Company in a bid to reduce late payments and rent arrears.

The Call-2-Collect service automatically extracts data from Adactus's housing management system every day to initiate a mixture of interactive telephone calls and SMS messaging to remind tenants that a payment is due or has

been missed. The service is configured with a specified schedule of retries so that problem tenants can be pursued more vigorously, with a complete audit trail of all call attempts. When contact is established, the service can also transfer the tenant to a customer services advisor to help resolve any problems or to make a direct payment.

Kimberley Clarke, operations director of finance, Adactus Housing Group, said, "With

the change in legislation around welfare reform, we realised that our income team would need to be on the front foot just to maintain current income levels. Although we are only in the early stages of the pilot, the results are very encouraging. We have replaced both the cost and inherent delay of sending some of our arrears notices by post and we believe that earlier intervention will be essential to maintain income levels."



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Landmark's asset management intelligence for Family Mosaic

Family Mosaic started work earlier this year with Landmark Information Group to create a range of address matching, data cleansing and property analysis services as part of a data quality, verification and improvement programme for its portfolio of 24,000 properties.



As a result of the data analysis exercise managed by the Landmark Analytics division (formerly Calnea Analytics), around 40 possible illegal sublets were flagged for further investigation, in addition to over 200 potential leaseholder re-sales or sublets where Family Mosaic did not have the data.

In addition, Landmark Analytics verified specific property types, the number of bedrooms and bathrooms across Family Mosaic's property portfolio and identified potential discrepancies in council ward and local authority data which Family Mosaic can now investigate and verify.

Neil Topping, business processes officer, Family Mosaic said, "With over 24,000

properties in our portfolio and serving more than 45,000 people, it is vital that the information in our property database is accurate on a number of levels and so we have carried out this intelligence exercise with Landmark Analytics.

"Our immediate need was to ensure that all addresses in our database matched the Royal Mail's format, but since working with Landmark, we have been able to analyse a wider range of metrics, such as bedroom count. This is particularly important due to the so-called 'bedroom tax' as this information needs to be accurate for the benefit of our tenants."

Orchard buys in4systems



Orchard has just bought in4systems, a leading supplier of asset management solutions to the housing sector, for an undisclosed sum. Orchard funded the acquisition from its own cash reserves, after 29 per cent growth over the past three years and 2012 revenues of over £14 million.

John Doughty, sales and marketing director, Orchard, said, "The range of solutions provided by in4systems is a welcome addition to our product portfolio. That said, we recognise that customers have a choice, so we have made a commitment to continue providing high levels of integration between our housing management system and other asset

management systems such as Keystone. Equally, we are committed to ensuring that in4systems' Promaster product suite offers high levels of integration with other housing management systems."

John Buckland, director, in4systems, said, "We are delighted that Orchard chose to acquire in4systems. From the outset we felt that there was a real synergy between the cultures of the two companies and we were impressed by the high level of effort Orchard puts into relationships with its customers."

Livin takes viability appraisals in-house with SDS



After having used a developer's agent for viability appraisals for many years, Livin has brought the function in-house following the implementation of ProVal from SDS.

Wayne Harris, executive director of property and development,

Livin, said, "We wanted a supplier of industry-recognised appraisal software that was easy to use and flexible enough to meet changing development parameters. Our developer's agent was already using ProVal so although we looked at what other housing providers were using, it was an easy choice to go with the system."

Once ProVal was being used regularly at Livin, testing began on SDS Sequel for the project management and cash flow monitoring of their developments. Both systems are now used for all developments from site appraisals at the feasibility stage through to managing the entire HCA AHP 2011/15 programme, including the HCA empty homes programme. In addition, Sequel is used for project managing Livin's HCA mortgage rescue scheme.

Andrew Kitchen, development manager, Livin, said, "ProVal enables us to carry out all our financial appraisals in-house without the need to appoint a consultant and gives us greater freedom by having as many scenarios as we need. We've also been able to see how the effects of changing parameters can make us more competitive."



Promaster

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As the UK's longest established Asset Management system provider, in4systems' immense experience in the sector means that Promaster provides extensive, fully integrated functionality covering all planned, routine and day to day maintenance activities. It has been researched, designed and developed with the needs of Social Housing providers in mind:

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Promaster enables you to make informed appraisals and decisions about individual properties and strategic issues affecting your estates or your entire stock portfolio. Promaster offers the advantages of being web browser based. This means that the wealth of comprehensive modular functionality can be delivered via any device that supports a web browser, as well as making it easy to host as a cloud based solution.

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Riverside implements C365 Online cloud system for regulatory compliance

Riverside Housing has deployed a new cloud-based system to ensure that all of its properties are fully compliant with existing regulations. The housing provider is using C365 Online's compliance management system to cut through its internal red tape and ensure that it is meeting its legal obligations.

C365 Online's hosted solution lets Riverside's asset management team manage the regulatory requirements associated with its 50,000 properties, including more than 90 health and safety commitments. Riverside reported that C365 Online will significantly reduce its regulatory burden while freeing up the property management team to concentrate on more urgent actions such as ensuring that remedial building work and other crucial work is completed.

More than 500 users, including Riverside's asset management team, internal assessors and external third-party compliance and remedial specialists, now have access to

the C365 Online system, allowing them to remotely download and manage statutory documentation relating to asbestos, fire risk assessments and water legionella management. The browser-based C365 Online system can be accessed from any location and from any device including PCs, laptops, tablets, PDAs and smartphones.

A spokesman for Riverside Housing said, "We must maintain the highest standards when managing our compliance with a wide range of regulations from health and safety to the environment. In the past this was a very cumbersome paper-based and unnecessarily bureaucratic process. With C365 Online everything has been automated, freeing up property management staff to work on the more immediate concerns of our tenants."

Midland Heart uses C365 Online to manage 46,000+ homes

Midland Heart is now also using C365 Online to manage the regulatory compliance



surrounding its management of almost 50,000 properties.

As part of its project at Midland Heart, C365 Online has also developed a bespoke public access portal for tenants to access their own property's information.

While implementing the new cloud service for Midland Heart, C365 Online created a database of third-party asbestos surveys with more than 12,000 reports uploaded and the scheduling of 2,600 annual re-inspections.

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Integrated communications for welfare reform

Liz Haworth, Executive Director for Business Transformation, Helena Partnerships

Helena Partnerships' executive director for business transformation, Liz Haworth, explains how a multi-channel approach is used to engage with tenants about welfare reform.

Welfare reform continues to be the biggest challenge affecting our tenants and our business, and since 2012 Helena has been running a robust communications campaign to help over 3,000 tenants to prepare for and cope with government changes to welfare benefits.

This campaign has used a variety of communications mechanisms to inform and engage with our tenants, ranging from helping 2,400 tenants face-to-face, hosting drop-in help sessions, sending a personalised direct mail to 2,000 tenants, and running local newspaper adverts alongside social media, online and press campaigns.

We know there isn't a 'one size fits all' answer for how we communicate with our tenants, and so we use the profiling and tenant insight data we have to inform how we tailor and deliver our key messages. It is imperative that tenants receive information in a format that is right for and appeals to them, and this belief drives the multi-channel approach to our communications delivery.

Direct mail and printed communications

Our campaign has used a variety of printed communications and our direct mail has been viewed as extremely innovative in the housing sector, using multiple levels of personalisation. Recognised as best practice in the sector, this communication was issued to tenants as a reminder about how their circumstances were affected by the introduction of the so-called 'bedroom tax', what this meant for them and their available options.

Engaging face to face

Drop-in sessions are held frequently so tenants can talk through their circumstances with an expert and have their income assessed, and regular advice

sessions are also held on debt, budgeting, benefits, reducing fuel bills and finding employment. We are also keen to encourage proactive and personalised communication so every tenant affected by welfare reform is aware of who their dedicated welfare reform officer is and how to contact them.

We have also formed a group of welfare reform community volunteers who engage with hard-to-reach tenants in community venues before referring tenants to our team of welfare reform experts for advice and support. These volunteers are well-known in their communities and speaking to them can break down barriers for those who find discussing welfare reform daunting.

Working with the media

We know our older tenants still regularly read their new local newspapers and so we have continued to build on the strong relationships we have with our local press by helping in coordinating features and also running adverts to raise awareness about welfare reform changes, the support we have available and how our tenants can get in touch with us.

Additionally, Helena has worked with regional radio and television stations to raise awareness about the implications of welfare reform and how our tenants and business will be affected. Some of our tenants have taken part in these programmes as a case study, illustrating their situation.

Embracing digital

Helena is continuing to expand its digital offer to our tenants, strengthening our service delivery. As every tenant interaction counts, we have been encouraging as many tenants as possible to engage with us online and continue to do so.

We have a dedicated welfare reform section on our website and tenants can seek further advice and request help by also visiting our TV site or by emailing our 'one call' contact centre.

Video has been incorporated into our website to explain welfare reform changes and Helena tenants are kept up to date with welfare reform content via our Facebook page. We will also be running more live Facebook chats, enabling tenants to ask experts questions about benefits, debt and budgeting advice.

Our next focus is to maximise the use of mobile technology to enable us to offer a more intuitive service as we continue to champion digital inclusion for all. Hundreds of tenants have benefitted from having access to free internet and computer use in our offices.

Looking to the future

We want to make it as easy as possible for all tenants to interact with us and for those affected by welfare reform to get in touch, so we can help them to make the best decisions for their circumstances.

Our statistics show that we have experienced a 40 per cent increase in telephony demand in 2013/2014 compared to 2012/13, and more than four times as much footfall at our head-office each week compared to this time last year - with a sustained footfall increase in other Helena offices.

We will continue to use a variety of communications mechanisms where appropriate, to ensure we maintain high levels of engagement with our tenants.

Liz Haworth is executive director for business transformation at Helena Partnerships.

kypera



Housing & Finance Software

Caroline Allen, Director of Finance at Housing for Women

"Kypera is a fully integrated system written using Microsoft technologies so its look, feel and functions behave exactly as our staff are used to with the Microsoft Office suite."

Malcolm Bowker Chief Executive at Harrogate Families

"One of the challenges of being in a small organisation is that any member of staff may have to take a call and provide an answer to a customer on any aspect of our service. I believe that Kypera will give us that flexibility, enabling each user to log on and find the information that they need."

Anne Dickie, Director at Glen Housing

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Management information for procurement

Rob Peck, Strategic Procurement Manager, Procurement for Housing

As procurement comes under increasing scrutiny, Procurement for Housing's strategic procurement manager, Rob Peck, asks if CIOs are providing the necessary management information to drive business efficiencies.

A major challenge for many CIOs is providing senior managers with the management information they need to make business decisions. This is particularly so when it comes to procurement information which is often held in disparate systems, different formats and when spending is classified to budgets rather than commodities. Standardisation, classification, de-duplication and aggregation of spend data is a necessary evil if analysis is to be robust and of sufficient quality to inform business decision-making, but it can take up a lot of time and resources to accomplish successfully.

If you want to maximise business effectiveness for your organisation, you have to have a complete understanding of your current situation. This means looking at historic data, spend patterns and trends

in many different areas of the organisation to identify which suppliers, categories or departments warrant attention. For most housing providers, the necessary data will be in a number of different systems, but while accounts payable, purchase ledger, e-procurement, purchase cards and contracts management systems all hold valuable information, it will often be in differing formats and poorly coded, presenting challenges when you try to aggregate them into a single data source.

With the best will in the world, procurement teams rarely have the time to carry out these time-consuming and inefficient processes, which is why an effective spend analysis tool is so critical. Data is collected, cleansed, classified and aggregated into a clean dataset, quickly providing a clear and comprehensive view of organisational spend and enabling you to identify areas for improvement and ask important questions such as 'why is supplier X raising so many invoices?', 'why do we use so many suppliers to buy a single product?' and 'why do X per cent of invoices cost more to process than the value of the invoice?'

Clearer visibility of your current situation allows you to prioritise the initiatives that will have greatest impact, and to measure their impact. The process doesn't have to be overwhelming because once you understand your current situation, clear management information can show you what to do next. From rationalisation of the supplier base, to identifying non-compliant buying, or opportunities for collaboration and volume aggregation, having clear management information can actually make the process pretty simple.

And although finance systems are great for managing spend against budgets and understanding what has been spent, the major benefit of a true spend analysis system is that you can identify what you are spending that you may not need to spend, and in times of significant austerity and welfare reform, it is possible to reduce spending without reducing the amount that you buy.

Rob Peck is the strategic procurement manager for Procurement for Housing.

MOBILE WORKING



Tough terrain for 1st Touch at Castlehill

Castlehill Housing Association has signed an enterprise agreement for mobile workforce management software from 1st Touch. The software will be used by housing officers and maintenance workers to access and update back-office information on tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices.

1st Touch mobile was chosen because it had an existing integration with the Aareon housing management system used by Castlehill. Another key factor in Castlehill's decision was 1st Touch's Smart Airtime feature which allows data to be sent to and from the mobile devices in short compressed bursts when a signal is available.

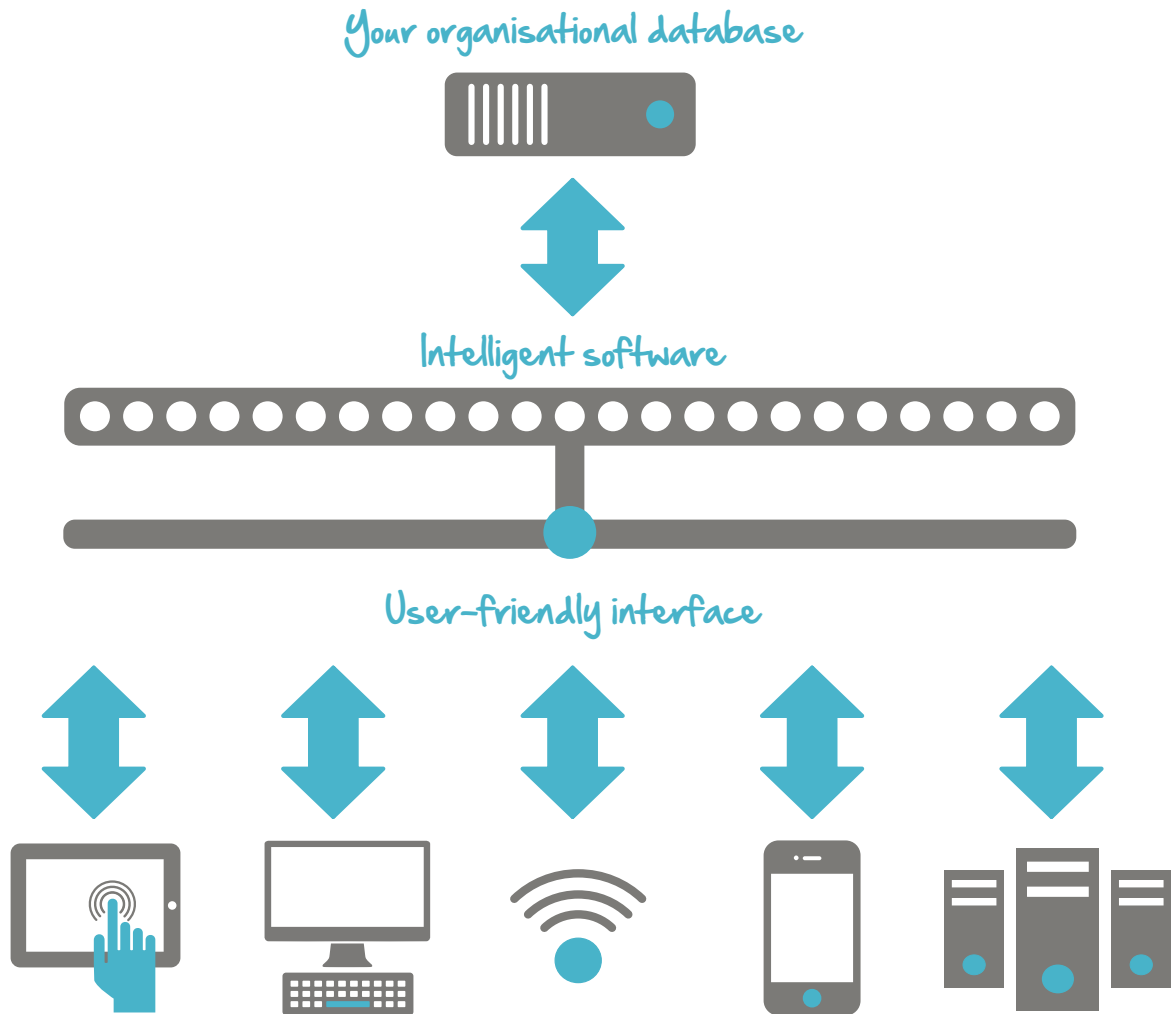
Geoff Helme, financial director, Castlehill Housing Association, said, "We are always focused on finding new ways in which we can improve our customer interface. Investing in 1st Touch mobile workforce software enables us to automate our customer-facing processes for mobile workers and to reduce response times in areas such as maintenance. It is quite a shift away from how we worked previously and will undoubtedly improve our productivity and deliver efficiencies.

"This is no small task, however, as the geography in this part of the country poses a potentially huge challenge for any mobile application. People tend to forget how big an area we cover and how sparsely populated some regions are. It is often not an easy environment and the reception is frequently extremely patchy. With its Smart Airtime feature, 1st Touch copes well with the challenge as it can send data back to base in short encrypted bursts when a signal is available. Naturally, this was very important to us and was a major consideration in our choice."

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Spirit Data Capture gets a good reception at Peaks & Plains

Peaks and Plains Housing Trust is now using Motorola PDAs running Windows Mobile 6.5 and MobiControl device management software from SOTI for its 80 mobile workers, following recommendations from Spirit Data Capture.

Simon Penaluna, assistant director of ICT, Peaks and Plains Housing Trust, said, "We wanted mobile devices that would be semi-rugged and could be used as a phone as well as a PDA. We also wanted to make sure that they wouldn't reach the end of their life within two months of buying them."

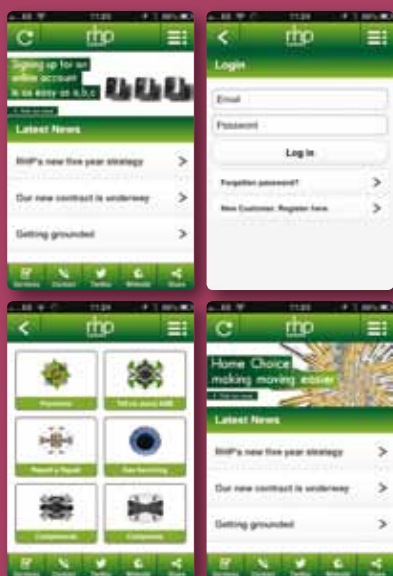
The selection of the new mobile system was based on greater resilience to knocks and drops than the housing provider's previous mobile devices, better reception in areas with poor network reception and longer battery life. In addition, the choice of mobile device was

limited because Peaks and Plains' housing management system only runs on the Windows Mobile 6.5 operating system.

Penaluna said, "The reception from the Motorola device is much better than the others we tried, and it's very robust and reliable – in my opinion, the ES400 is the best Windows Mobile 6.5 device available. The Motorola units link into Outlook to provide access to emails and also link into our housing management system, which communicates information about jobs to and from the operatives."

"MobiControl allows us to restrict access to the different aspects of the devices and to take control of them from the office if there are any problems. This cuts the cost of support for our IT team as it avoids the need for them to either travel to the operative or to get the operative to return to the office to resolve the issues."

RHP launches mobile site



Following its introduction of an online two-hour repairs booking service last year, RHP has now introduced a new mobile site and device detection for its website, after a profiling survey in 2012 found that 20 per cent of tenants accessed the internet via mobile devices.

Visitors to the main RHP website through a mobile device will be automatically routed to RHP's dedicated 'm-site' and will be able to view content in the correct proportion for their smartphone or tablet. Furthermore, while RHP was developing the new

application it also upgraded its payment system so that tenants now have the option of paying their rent or service charges via their mobile device.

RHP developed the new site in tandem with external developer Emerald over three months, with the m-site going live in June 2013. RHP reported that although the original budget for the entire project was around £50,000, the final costs were lower.

One month after it went live, around 12 per cent of all web traffic to RHP came via the

m-site, with a peak of nearly 200 visitors per day by the end of the month. The m-site also links direct to RHP's Twitter feed.

Jonathan Creaser, head of ICT, RHP, said, "We plan to replicate our two-hour repairs booking system on our mobile platform and the implementation of a new solution called 'My Home Online'. This will integrate with our Keystone asset management system so that tenants can keep up to date with the major work planned for their homes."

Arena iPads for Asra Housing workers

Running as a pilot project in Leicester, Asra Housing Group has given iPads to all of its housing and income officers, with firm instructions to get out onto the streets and deal with customers' complaints and comments face-to-face. The project is using an iPad-based version of Arena Partnership's TP Tracker software.

Sally-Anne Underhill, who is in charge of the mobile working project at Asra Housing, said, "It is too easy to become desk-bound when the phone never stops ringing and the emails keep pinging into your inbox. And we have listened to our tenants, who told us that they would like to see our housing and income officers working on the ground on our estates."

Asra Housing's performance management team worked with Arena Partnerships to develop I-Tracker, a new version of TP Tracker for the iPad, in order to enable housing officers to log in and check up-to-date information on things such as rent statements and antisocial behaviour logs while visiting tenants at home.

Underhill said, "We are already seeing some great results. These include faster and more consistent handling of enquiries, reduced paperwork, less travel for staff and increased tenant satisfaction."

Kelly Kirby, one of Asra Housing's Leicester-based housing officers, said, "I'm really enjoying mobile working and I

can already see that customers are getting a quicker and more personable response to their queries. For example, if a tenant wants to see how much rent they owe, I can show them there and then. I can also log antisocial behaviour issues, whereas before I would have had to go back to the office to do so.

"The best thing is that we're out and about and I get a chance to talk to lots of customers face-to-face every day. Often, if someone has called our call centre and logged an enquiry, I'll go straight to their door to see them rather than picking up the phone."



Telecetera mobilises Severn Vale's workers

Severn Vale Housing Society has successfully deployed a mobile working system from Telecetera for its repairs team. The system is now being used by around 30 field-based workers and 15 office-based staff, and has meant that there are now hardly ever any outstanding or active repair tickets. Telecetera reported that the mobile project cost in the region of £45,000.

Following an audit of its operational process, SVHS decided to focus its attention on its repairs service as this area was identified as the most promising in terms of increasing value for money and achieving productivity improvements. At the time, the housing provider's

repairs team were chasing over 100 job tickets at any one time and the main office was receiving up to 200 requests for repairs each week.

Following a tender process, Telecetera was chosen to implement its Connect mobile workforce system. Through working with a variety of SVHS employees, certain modules were identified as meeting particular areas for improvement, including job scheduling, appointments, stock and reporting.

After a pilot programme with selected workers, Connect was rolled out in stages to ensure teams had enough time and

training to integrate it into their daily routines.

Alex Wakeham, field operative, Severn Vale Housing Society, said, "Connect is easy to use for the average person, and helps structure my day with my time being used more effectively."

All jobs are now completed through one system; there are no additional forms and site teams have gone from 100 unsolved job tickets to just a handful. In the first year alone, active repair jobs went from 200 to zero and through real-time reporting, SVHS is seeing more 'right first-time' data and more in-depth information, as well as being able to manage

appointments and the location of its mobile workers.

Darren Knight, customer service manager, Severn Vale Housing Society, said, "Before the introduction of Connect, it felt like every other call was a tenant chasing a repair, which wasted their time and put pressure on our staff and resources. Connect helped prevent these avoidable calls and increased our call-answering times, reduced our 'abandon' rate and allowed the customer service team time to take on new work due to the time savings."



Mobile access – The clever compromise

Janet Matthews, Head of Marketing, Longhurst Group

Housing providers across the country are waking up to the reality that their customers aren't where they left them. Increasing numbers of tenants are demanding services whenever and wherever they want them so the Longhurst Group is on the move.

Over the past year, we have developed our customer websites to deliver increased functionality allowing residents to request, report and pay for services online. It's our ambition to migrate even more fundamental actions into the digital arena, to make interacting with us no more bothersome than updating a Facebook status; hence our decision to launch mobile sites to support all mobile-enabled devices.

We developed and launched these sites alongside our websites, which has the additional benefit of allowing us to manage content for both through the same content management system. By approaching the technology in this way, we essentially bought the websites and paved the way to mobile apps for free – excellent value for money!

The current trend for apps has led to many technology suppliers contacting us to sell

app developments, quoting large sums of money for development together with annual maintenance charges. This caused us to reflect on what constitutes good practice when it comes to embracing these emerging platforms in relation to our social principles.

After countless meetings to discuss 'app vs. mobile-enabled content: what's the difference?', a fancy homepage icon seemed to be the only element missing, so we commissioned one for just a few hundred pounds. This branded icon creates a single-touch shortcut straight to our mobile sites where customers can use any of our online functions. Thus far they seem to suit our customer's needs perfectly and at a fraction of the cost of a fully-fledged app.

So are software developers taking advantage of the current thirst for technology-driven communications solutions? As housing providers with a social responsibility to our tenants, are we pushing back hard enough to get the products we need at prices that don't compromise our ability to support the communities we serve? Technology

underpins our customer and stakeholder communications more each day, so we need to be confident to ask for what we want and negotiate from a position of knowledge and understanding.

With regulatory frameworks placing greater emphasis on providing evidence of value for money, the rationale behind our decisions needs to be watertight. This leads us to ask – is investing thousands of pounds on app development the best use of resources when there are much cheaper alternatives?

Multi-channel communications are undoubtedly a fundamental part of today's marketing strategy, but in this age of austerity our drive to go digital has to be supported by an ability to challenge the technology providers if we're to get the best value for money for our businesses and our customers.

So, to find out the difference between 'app vs. mobile-enabled content', take a look at www.longhurst-group.org.uk.

Janet Matthews is head of marketing at Longhurst Group.



Connexion2 protects Thames Valley workers

Thames Valley Housing Association is now using Identicom lone-worker devices from Connexion2 to protect its front-line staff. The devices were bought as part of Connexion2's SoloProtect package which includes inclusive billing, 24/7 monitoring, SIM card, network access, device training and monthly monitoring.

TVHA previously used mobile and landline phones combined with an emergency code to raise an alarm. Now almost 100 TVHA staff regularly use the Identicom devices, including accommodation officers, revenue teams, and neighbourhood officers. The devices are also being used by office-based staff who work on their own occasionally late at night or during weekends.

Suki Kahlon, facilities officer, Thames Valley Housing Association, said, "We have made Identicom part of our health and safety policy. We decided we needed a more robust system than we were using before for our lone workers. With Identicom, personnel can use the 'Red Alert' at any time they feel vulnerable, knowing that if required they can quickly get support should they feel threatened."

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Omni-channel or omni-shambles?



Housing providers are increasingly talking about adopting a multi-channel communications strategy, but how should it be done, what are the benefits to tenants and housing providers, and are the IT suppliers ready with the right solutions? Housing Technology interviewed a panel of multi-channel experts to find out their views.

Most housing providers already have multiple ways to communicate with their tenants and most tenants have a choice of how they contact their housing providers, such as by post, email, online or by telephone. However, the 'Holy Grail' of multi-channel communications (MCC) is to not integrate their existing channels but also offer new channels such as apps, text and social media.

Alison Davies, group change programme manager at GreenSquare Group, said, "For us, MCC is a transformation agenda which will drive an increasing use of new platforms and devices to deliver services and information to our residents. As a Universal Credit pilot, traffic into our organisation has increased so we need to exploit the potential of MCC to service this growth in demand.

"Routine housing services therefore need to be delivered using low cost, accessible and easy to use platforms so that we can focus our premium contact methods to support specific tenant groups."



"The merits of developing in a web application architecture using HTML5 far outweigh the approach of developing specific applications for each channel."

Chris Potter, Director of Uniclass, ROCC Computers

Mike Eckersley, a senior consultant at Capita, added, "MCC is the ability for a housing provider to communicate with its tenants through whichever medium they prefer – whether that's post, email, telephone or Twitter – and clearly the more channels that an organisation opens up, the more choice its tenants have."

A concise definition of MCC was provided by Paul Miller, head of contact centre at PCMS Group, who said, "It's about providing tenants with a 'Martini' service – any time, any place, anywhere."



"Routine housing services need to be delivered using low cost, easy to use platforms so that we can focus our premium contact methods to support specific tenant groups."

Alison Davies, Group Change Programme Manager, GreenSquare Group

Technical considerations

Adding new channels, such as social media or mobile apps, is relatively easy to do. The difficulties lie in joining up all of the channels so that all communications are visible and actionable from any channel, regardless of from which channel the query or complaint originated. Furthermore, MCC isn't a standalone technology infrastructure; to work successfully, it must have close integration with other business systems.

Paul Swannell, sales manager for social housing in Ciber UK's SAP practice, said, "As well as integrating communications across channels, MCC itself should be linked to other business systems such as repairs and maintenance systems. Moving to this 'single business platform' approach is the most efficient means of achieving two-way communication of requests, updates and outcomes between the tenant and housing provider."

The importance of viewing MCC as an integrated part of a housing provider's technology and business infrastructure was echoed by Rob Fletcher, group head of ICT at GreenSquare. He said, "Our MCC solution needs to be delivered through a single platform and a single user interface, making it easy to deliver the same solution to any device. However, the key point is that MCC should be integrated with back office, call centre and housing management systems. Without this, MCC doesn't get off the ground."

Eckersley added, "The most important technical implication is being able to manage the inbound and outbound contacts effectively – it is one thing to open up all the available channels, but quite another to ensure that contacts on these channels are automatically dealt with and fed into the correct workflows within the organisation. In essence, this means a multimedia call-centre solution which 'receives' and assigns the contacts to the relevant agent, alongside a CRM system to manage the workflows and responses."

Benefits to your tenants

For tenants, MCC means more choice, both in terms of which channels they choose to use and when they contact their housing providers, faster responses and problem resolutions and, in many cases, more opportunities to 'self-serve' so they become less reliant on their housing provider.

Swannell said, "When MCC is effectively integrated with tenant history, preferences and data analytics, it has the potential to truly impress tenants with the timeliness and relevance of the responses and information they receive. Furthermore, when MCC is fully integrated with back-office systems, tenants will be absolutely delighted to find that an engineer has already fixed the faulty lift that they reported the night before via a mobile app."



"Multi-channel communications are a reality and in fact, the solutions are ahead of the marketing hype. The new East Village community that we're involved in shows that it's already happening."

Mitesh Patel, Managing Director, Fifosys

Chris Potter, director of Uniclass for ROCC Computers, added, "MCC gives tenants additional methods to communicate with their housing provider, which saves time and money for tenants in terms of travel time and expenses. In addition, MCC improves tenant access and supports housing providers' digital inclusion agendas."

Furthermore, universal credit and welfare reform will significantly change how tenants engage with their housing provider. As Eckersley from Capita said, "As the impact of welfare reform hits, the effect on telephone contact is likely to be heavy, so tenants able to bypass this using new channels will be at an advantage."

Advantages of MCC to housing providers

The main advantages to housing providers of implementing MCC are to increase efficiency, reduce costs and increase tenant satisfaction.

Eckersley explained, "The main advantages are business-related; a true MCC strategy will enable more efficient handling of tenant communications and it will streamline contact management activities. Efficiencies will also be made through

Omni-channel or omni-shambles

Continued from opposite page



"When multi-channel communications are integrated with tenant history, preferences and data analytics, it can truly impress tenants with the timeliness and relevance of the responses they receive."

Paul Swannell, Sales Manager for Social Housing, Ciber UK's SAP Practice

operational staff always having access to the latest chapter of the tenant's story – whatever channel that came through. Up to date and accurate information means less repeated work, fewer missed appointments and fewer missed opportunities."

Mitesh Patel, managing director of Fifosys, said, "From a service point of view, MCC enables better communication with tenants, and these multiple touch-points can drive engagement and activity across the tenant community. But the approach also brings benefits to the wider community. It is not uncommon for new property developments to encounter resistance from the local community when they are first introduced – but multi-channel communication provides a powerful platform for community engagement."



"Multi-channel communications should be integrated with back office, call centre and housing management systems. Without this, it won't get off the ground."

Rob Fletcher, Group Head of ICT, GreenSquare Group

Miller added, "Social media and email channels can be far more efficient to run than traditional call centres – one person can handle multiple conversations. At the same time, a far greater benefit may be the ability to communicate personally with an individual through their mobile device or personal email address. There is an opportunity to build relationships with individual tenants which will not only improve satisfaction but also help with revenue protection."

Which channels first?

Having decided to adopt MCC, one of the first steps for a housing provider is to establish which channels it wants to operate, and the only sensible way of doing so is to ask its tenants. However, this approach should come with the caveat that as many tenants may not use or even be aware of things like mobile apps or social media, they may need additional information and education before they can make full-informed decisions.

Miller from PCMS said, "Anything which is channel-related must be tenant-led. It should be possible to identify the priority of channels to be implemented, but also the times that they should be available and the services which should be provided. Successful implementations of MCC are always based on providing choice, not forcing tenants to change."

Ciber UK's Swannell added, "There are two aspects to this: first, find out what channels your tenants want to use; second, determine which channels you are technically and operationally ready for. The launch of an ineffective channel will create dissatisfied tenants and an increased burden on the contact centre."

Code once, use many times

When implementing MCC, housing providers have the choice of either developing dedicated applications for each channel or using tools such as HTML5 to 'code once, use many times' across the various channels. While the adoption of HTML5 and similar development tools is relatively recent, research firm Gartner expects more than half of all mobile apps deployed by 2016 will be based on HTML5.

Swannell said, "The merits of developing applications per channel can seem attractive, but caution is required due to the cost of ownership and siloed solutions. 'Code once' means just that, providing applications that can run on any operating system and mobile device, and HTML5 is a cost effective way to deliver a consistent look and feel across relevant channels. Alternatively a mobile platform offers a more advanced solution, simplifying cross-device development without forcing a one-size-fits-all approach."

Patel from Fifosys added, "The advantage is you don't just develop applications for each channel. You plan for a single, centralised source of information that is accessible from any device, but brought together into a portal."



"It is one thing to open up all the available channels, but quite another to ensure that contacts on these channels are automatically dealt with and fed into the correct workflows."

Mike Eckersley, Senior Consultant, Capita

There was additional support for HTML5 from ROCC's Potter who said, "The merits of developing in a web application architecture using HTML5 far outweigh the approach of developing specific

applications for each channel. Modern web application development results in an excellent user experience and offline capabilities are provided using browser caching so it doesn't matter if the mobile signal drops out."



"It's about providing tenants with a 'Martini' service – any time, any place, anywhere."

Paul Miller, Head of Contact Centre, PCMS Group

Hype or reality?

For all the benefits of MCC to tenants and housing providers alike, opinion seems to be divided regarding whether MCC systems are properly ready yet.

Greensquare's Fletcher said, "Our vision for MCC is way beyond what the IT suppliers seem to be providing at the moment. The end-to-end technical ecosystem simply doesn't appear to be available to deliver what we want. Vendors talk a lot about multi-channel benefits but are very silent on how this is delivered as a coherent solution. Much of the integration between systems, including CRM and housing systems, is at best patchy or even completely missing."

Miller added, "Overall the leading solutions do exactly what they promise; they make handling communications across multiple channels more efficient. However the initial outlay for true multi-channel packages is high and they generally aim at managing inbound and outbound telephone calls, email, SMS and social media through Twitter and Facebook."

"However, there will be a significant amount of work to integrate them with housing management systems and also to integrate channels such as post and emerging channels subsequently."

On a more positive note, Patel said, "MCC is a reality and in fact, the solutions are ahead of the marketing hype. The new East Village community that we're involved in shows that it's already happening."

Housing Technology would like to thank Mike Eckersley (Capita), Paul Swannell (Ciber UK), Mitesh Patel (Fifosys), Alison Davies and Rob Fletcher (GreenSquare), Paul Miller (PCMS Group) and Chris Potter (ROCC Computers) for contributing to this article.



Netcall to transform Alliance Homes' customer service

Alliance Homes has chosen Netcall's CRM and document management systems to improve customer service and revolutionise internal operations.

Before selecting Netcall's ECM suite, Alliance Homes said that it was looking for an enterprise-wide solution, offering a complete view of all tenant records, contacts and communications, as well as giving mobile access to workers in the field.

The ECM suite is a central repository for all records and interactions with mobile, telephony and two-way integration capabilities. Resources can then be easily allocated to the appropriate user at Alliance Homes so that tenants' queries can be answered and resolved faster.



Friday Hill TMO texting tenants with SDM

Friday Hill Tenant Management Organisation is using a text messaging service from SDM Housing to communicate better with its tenants, and in the process winning an award for innovative use of social media from the National Federation of TMOs.

Friday Hill implemented the SDM service in February 2012 at a cost of around £4,000. The TMO, which manages homes on behalf of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, is using text messaging to inform tenants about appointments for repairs, changes

to welfare reform, local events and board meetings.

Jeremy Carson, director, Friday Hill TMO, said, "We have seen an increase in the response rate for the repairs satisfaction survey from 26 per cent to just under 40 per cent, while substantially reducing the cost of collecting this data. We previously spent £4,000 per year on mailing out repairs satisfaction questionnaires but the texting service has reduced this to just over £100 per year."

Joe Robinson, chairman, Friday Hill TMO, said, "Many of our residents are elderly so it's really helpful to be able to communicate with so many of them in this way, especially in an emergency. For example, when part of the area we look after suffered a major power cut, we used the text messaging service to advise residents about the problem and keep them informed about the repairs."

Westward Housing signs care & support contract with Capita

Westward Housing Group has signed a seven-year contract with Capita for case management services to deliver its supported housing across Devon and Cornwall.

Capita will work with Westward to provide a 'gateway' operation, enabling the group to manage a new service on behalf of Torbay Council, whereby all housing and support referral and assessment information will be accessed through one channel.

The time taken to perform administrative tasks, not only by Westward but also by partner organisations, will be reduced. All paper-based forms will be converted to electronic format for direct input into a comprehensive web-based system. This will benefit hundreds of users by increasing the efficiency of Westward's housing support services and allowing staff to have instant access to detailed client records online.

Martin Oxley, supported housing director, Westward Housing Group, said, "In order to create great homes and neighbourhoods where people want to live and work, we need the right tools for the job. Capita's software will help create a truly streamlined and flexible system, with the whole customer journey being captured electronically."

Microsoft Dynamics CRM at AmicusHorizon

Amicus Horizon is using Microsoft's Dynamics CRM system to track all interactions with tenants and provide a single view of tenants' histories and preferences.

The housing provider was previously using its housing management system to capture income and property information, but it lacked the sophistication to track tenant calls or retain personal records.

Chris Roberts, CRM manager, AmicusHorizon, said, "Our housing management system couldn't tell us how, why, and when tenants were contacting us. Staff need a single view of tenants' histories and preferences. We have to be in a position to deal with tenants immediately and offer tailored advice, whether we're in the office or working remotely. Plus it's vital that case notes go to the right person, are easy to track, and link seamlessly with our other systems."

With help from Goldcrest Solutions, AmicusHorizon chose Microsoft Dynamics CRM 4.0. Roberts said, "We wanted a CRM system we could customise, yet be supported by the IT supplier. We looked at some CRM solutions, but they didn't offer

this post-customisation support. Microsoft was happy for us to tailor its system and we're supported fully by Goldcrest."

Dynamics CRM was first deployed to AmicusHorizon's customer experience team which had previously worked with a custom-built in-house system that was difficult to use. The new CRM system has made it easier for them to respond to tenants' queries because all of the relevant information and call history is now immediately accessible.

AmicusHorizon then rolled out Dynamics CRM in its contact centre, with the contact centre staff using the tenant database in a number of value-adding ways, such as when a tenant calls, the system might highlight an urgent issue.

John Barr, director of customer experience, AmicusHorizon, said, "Creating an active dialogue with tenants is important. Some are reluctant to talk at first so it's important that we reassure them.

"Furthermore, we're now much more evidence-based when we reply to tenants. We have accurate, reliable, and up-to-date data at our fingertips."

iPads running Dynamics CRM were then given to AmicusHorizon's income collection and financial inclusion teams. They meet tenants face-to-face and use the mobile devices to access real-time tenant information so that staff can update tenant information immediately, with a complete, traceable record accessible to all relevant service staff.

Following the introduction of Dynamics CRM, the number of live complaints has dropped from over 600 to just 44 over 18 months. With access to tenant records at the touch of a button, employees have the tools at their disposal to be more proactive, preventing issues before they escalate. And although the average call length has increased, the 'first-time fix' rate has improved from 77 to 93 per cent in the last year.

Barr said, "There's a trade-off. The more data we collect and the more we use the visual cues to tailor service, the longer the call. But the benefit is a more comprehensive tenant history. This gives a much more positive experience for the caller."



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Omni-channel tenant engagement

Chris Deery, Head of ICT, Solihull Community Housing

Solihull Community Housing's head of ICT, Chris Deery, explains how the housing provider is increasing its use of digital channels, in particular email and social media, to communicate and engage with its tenants.

Solihull Community Housing's research suggests that 60 per cent of our tenants have internet access, rising to 83 per cent of tenants of working age. Our aim is to communicate via email with those tenants who are online. This will save us money, especially in postage, and the money saved can help free up resources to support the 17 per cent of working-age tenants who are not online and are likely to be most seriously affected by the 'digital-by-default' nature of the new universal credit system.

Our welfare reform team has contacted those tenants affected by the benefits. When they talk to tenants, they also discuss digital inclusion issues to help inform tenants about the wider impacts of welfare reform.

SCH is also providing volunteers who work two days a week in the local library to help tenants who need to access the universal job search system; this is seen as being a key part of our corporate social responsibility targets.

SCH uses all the usual digital channels including the web, Facebook and Twitter. We now have almost 2,000 followers on Twitter, compared with fewer than 500 in May 2011, reflecting the general move towards electronic communications.

For example, we recently reunited two lost dogs found by our caretakers with their owners using Facebook appeals. We now have over 600 'likes' on Facebook, compared with 300 in May 2011. Facebook has generated some good debates among users (cycle paths, welfare reform and our high-rise over-cladding project) and these were good opportunities to put our point across. We hold regular competitions

on Facebook and we have promoted community events and local jobs.

Our research suggests that young male tenants aged 18-25 are far more likely to lose their tenancy than other groups. These are often people on very low levels of income/benefits who may well have just come out of the care system. Our welfare reform team are contacting people in this group and will be offering them access to a digital 'logbook' to help them manage their finances and tenancy. A digital logbook gives tenants a personalised portal to information about their home, their tenancy and their benefits.

We are introducing a mobile app that will allow tenants to pay their rent using a smartphone and we are also developing a Facebook app that will allow people to view their rent account from within Facebook.

We have recently turned on a facility in our main Capita housing management system that means whenever a housing officer sends a letter to a tenant, the system will automatically check to see if an email address has been provided by the tenant and if so, the system will send an email instead of a letter. This has been running since February 2013 and has already saved us at least £1,600 in postage costs. Although email is not new, before we switched on this email facility, our income collection manager asked if any other housing providers in the West Midlands were using email to send out arrears letters to tenants. He was told that no one was using email and that all arrears letters were still being posted.

We are prepared to take risks to move the digital agenda forward. We are sending these arrears letters via email when other housing providers have not taken this simple step out of fear that it might weaken a potential eviction case in future.

Of course, when we first started sending the emails, quite a few were bouncing back due to the address being out of date or having been mistyped into our housing management system. These teething errors have been fixed and now we very rarely see emails bounce.

No communication tool is 100 per cent reliable. Human errors will always cause problems, telephone numbers will get transposed, the postman will put someone else's letters through your letterbox, and text messages sometimes disappear into cyberspace. However we have been using email now to send all sorts of letters and have found no evidence to suggest that it is any less reliable than any other communication channel.

We also encountered a feeling from some users that if something is important it should be sent by post. There was a feeling that a letter in an envelope on headed paper with a proper person's signature carried more gravitas; perhaps a tenant could dismiss an email more readily than a letter. However, we have been sending out arrears letters by email for around six months and have found no evidence that tenants are more likely to ignore an email than a letter. We have also found no evidence that arrears levels for tenants who receive communication via email are different to those who receive their communication by post.

While it's still early days, I would have no hesitation in advising any similar organisations, with the capability to do so, to go down the road towards email communication.

Chris Deery is head of ICT at Solihull Community Housing.

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The importance of multi-channel communications

Jane Hancer, Communications Manager, Looking Local

Looking Local's communications manager, Jane Hancer, explains how delivering multi-channel customer services is no longer a 'nice to have' and it's not just for housing providers that can afford to take digital inclusion seriously.

Despite the increased competition for our attention, TV viewing in the UK continues to rise, from an average of 3.7 hours per person per day in 2012 to over 4 hours in 2013, outstripping all other forms of digital communication as the preferred way of viewing content.

Jane Rumble, Ofcom's head of media research, said, "There are a number of factors that are fuelling this increase, one of which is that we're coming into our living rooms today clutching smartphones and tablets – providing a range of opportunities to do things while we're also watching television."

Ofcom also reported that more than 50 per cent of adults now use a smartphone (up from 27 per cent two years ago) and the average household owns more than three devices capable of connecting to the internet. So multi-channel access is more relevant than ever due to the sheer number of devices, the different access routes people have, and the fact that people want to access the same service on a variety of channels, thus channels need to be compatible, connected and interoperable.

Looking Local, which is a technology owned by the public sector, has been delivering housing and wider public-sector services on a range of channels and devices for ten years. And this vision to develop technologies able to exploit this mix of platforms is now coming of age, enabling housing providers to deliver services on a range of channels without needing to manage them all internally.

Around 40 housing providers use TV, social networks, mobile, games consoles and the 'My Landlord' app to widen access to housing repairs for their tenants. For example, AmicusHorizon uses this range of channel access to deliver its services to great effect. Indeed, it was the addition of the My Landlord app and its integrated web management portal that made a real impact in the last year.

Sean Wijesiri, digital services manager, AmicusHorizon, said, "The My Landlord app gives residents a simple way to report any repair using the one device they keep with them at all times – a smartphone. The app is free for residents to download and very simple to use. All they have to do to report a repair is take a photo, write a short description of the problem, type their contact details, availability and submit.

"The application provides a simple solution for the operative. It's fantastic as not only does it have a picture, the detail and the tenant's availability, but it also allows us to see every single comment the tenant said and exactly how the operative replied; there is no confusion. As such, My Landlord is an actual communications platform rather than an email that has to be managed. Best of all, it is very convenient for residents because it's available on multiple platforms."

Over the past year Amicus Horizon has realised a range of benefits from Looking Local and its integration with other back-end systems, such as improved resident engagement, more mature performance analysis and scrutiny, and significant per-transaction savings.

Delivering multi-channel customer services is no longer a 'nice to have' and it's not just for housing providers that can afford to take digital inclusion seriously. Organisations that fail to adopt a multi-channel approach will be unable to deliver the savings needed by the sector or that technology affords, while assuring the levels of service expected by tenants.

Jane Hancer is the communications manager for Looking Local.

Online learning partnership from Bernicia, Liquid Voice & Housing e-Academy



Bernicia Group, Liquid Voice and Housing e-Academy have teamed up to create an online training course to complement housing providers' existing call-centre solutions, with the aim of communicating the importance of customer excellence.

Having already worked with Bernicia since 2007, Liquid Voice invited Housing e-Academy, as e-learning experts in social housing, to jointly create the new online course.

Debra Beattie, head of organisational development, Bernicia Group, said, "One

of our key messages is that delivering outstanding customer service is the responsibility of everyone, not just those people in customer service teams. We were delighted when we were asked to be involved in the development of a course which aims to help social housing providers like ourselves achieve higher standards of customer service and implement best practice across their businesses."

Liquid Voice worked with Bernicia to create rich video content and 'real life' case studies to support the

course. Drawing on real life experiences and situations adds an extra element to the course and Liquid Voice said that learners using its online course can relate more readily to how customer excellence affects all aspects of work.

Beattie said, "The role of frontline staff in delivering customer service excellence cannot be understated. The aim of these e-learning resources is to aid the development of their softer skills which will help us continue to deliver better customer service."



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Journey into the 'known'... Setting out and reaching base camp

Mandy Dunstan, Head of Business Transformation, The Barnet Group

Welcome back to part two of our journey! Since our last article, we have been busy working on the successful introduction of our new iTrent HR solution. This is a web-based system for talent management, workforce management, HR and payroll from MidlandHR, and for us it's a significant investment, both financially and in staff resources.

iTrent has five modules: absence and case management; recruitment; learning events; people development and performance management. iTrent is now managing some of our old paper-based processes, such as holidays and sickness absences. Preparing for this was a very useful exercise because it gave us the opportunity to review what we do and how we do it; consequently we're now much smarter and more effective in using detailed staff data to support the business.

We will be using the people development module to ensure that we can manage and

develop the talent we already have; this will all be part of our approach to nurturing and developing the team of the future – something we're really excited about.

The performance management module will enable everyone to have online conversations about how they're progressing in meeting not just their objectives, but those of the entire business. This is a further building block in realising our vision in having a public sector ethos with a private sector commercial focus.

Everyone will therefore be more assured about the part they play, both as an individual and as a team member.

iTrent is part of a whole range of initiatives in our 'All Systems Go' project which will be transformational for The Barnet Group. One of our key challenges has been to win 'hearts and minds' as to how iTrent and the other packages we have bought (Clearvale

for the intranet; Aareon QL for housing management and CRM; and Covalent for business intelligence) will transform our working environment.

Barnet's HR team have all been to our demo and training sessions in order to become 'super users' on the new system so that they can eventually train all of our 500+ staff.

The first test for our support strategy was the 'go live' of the self-service absence in July 2013. One of our major teething problems was 'lock outs' and the creation of new passwords, but floorwalkers and a dedicated hotline helped resolve the issues quickly. So far iTrent has met all our expectations and the overall verdict is "we love this system."

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



Self-service HR at Newydd Housing with Access software

Newydd Housing Association is introducing new HR software from Access Group, with the emphasis on making it easier for its staff to self-serve many routine HR processes. The SelectHR software will replace the housing provider's previous mixture of Excel spreadsheets and a bespoke in-house HR system.

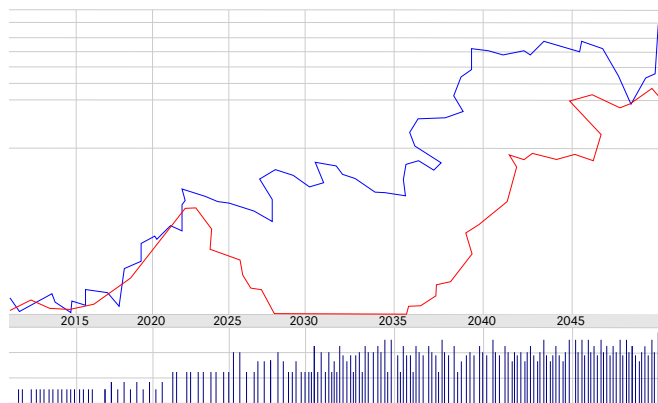
Olwen Thomas, HR manager, Newydd Housing Association, said, "Our previous HR system didn't have the flexibility we wanted and needed a lot of paper-based processes to support its functionality. It also meant that we needed additional software to meet other HR needs, such as flexible hours and payroll."

Access Group and its Select HR software were chosen after a tender process with five other software providers. Implementation of the software began in August 2013 and is expected to be live by April 2014.

"We'll be able to fully customise the software to allow it to grow and adapt to our business needs. As we have complex training and appraisal requirements we needed a system that could cope with our needs and Access was one of the few software providers that met them. As well as being competitively priced, the software is based on a Microsoft platform which makes it easy and intuitive to use.

"This HR system will empower our staff and managers to access the information they need at their fingertips anytime, anywhere. We will be able to automate some HR services, such as sickness and annual leave, using the system's self-service functionality to free up the time spent by the HR team on administrative tasks."

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DIGITAL INCLUSION 

New courses for digital inclusion

Digital Unite has launched a new range of online courses to help housing providers introduce tenants to the benefits of the internet and show them how to master the basics such as using a keyboard and mouse, searching the web and using email. These 'digital champion' courses are flexible, self-study e-learning programmes which include practical exercises, case studies, useful links and a learner's certificate of completion.

The new Quick Start courses cover a variety of essential topics including:

- Creating the right learning environment for beginners, what hardware, software and websites to use, and how to create and maintain learner interest.
- Building learner confidence and email security, shopping and

comparing prices, and financial advice online.

- Registering with websites, paying online, saving and making money online and e-banking.
- Basic word processing skills, computer housekeeping and using email and the internet, finding relevant online training and gathering the right personal information to create a CV.
- Researching jobs online, uploading CVs and completing online application forms, networking for job hunters, interview skills and troubleshooting in the learning session.

Kathy Valdes, business support manager, Digital Unite, said, "Experience shows that helping beginners as a digital champion or computer buddy is one of the most effective ways to inspire, enthuse and support non-users to get online."

Get Online 2013

The Tinder Foundation, formerly known as UK Online Centres, is running its annual 'Get Online' week during 14-20 October 2013 with the aim of helping tenants to improve their digital skills and reduce digital exclusion.

Thousands of Get Online week events will happen throughout the UK in UK online centres, libraries and community venues.

Tinder is encouraging housing providers to take part in Get Online; you can sign up at www.ukonlinecentres.com/marketing and in return you will receive a pack of materials to help you promote your activities, and help and support you to run your event successfully.



Katie Ganly (L) & Anita Greenhill (R), Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

Manchester University reviews the 'Digital by Default' report

In the networked society and digital economy, global information flows are creating new patterns of communication and exchange, arguably rendering traditional urban patterns almost obsolete. However, the gap between the haves and the have-nots has the potential to continue to widen, both online and offline, with possible new forms of inequality emerging.

Housing Technology's 'Digital by Default' report (DbD) focuses on how to address the divide in relation to digital inclusion and IT use by those in the social housing sector as a means to address social inclusion. The report suggests a predominantly 'deliberative approach', where active decision-making is carried out with state agencies, citizens and organisations interacting to discuss issues and reach decisions (decisions shared and deliberated upon) in an attempt to overcome the divide. According to the DbD report, over 8.7 million adults in the UK have never used the internet nor experienced the benefits of going online, and 4.1 million of these adults are living in social housing.

However, the research contained in the report shows that regardless of the breadth of knowledge and information being made available to the housing sector about making the digital transition, in most cases the cost of moving to digital services is over estimated by many of those housing providers being targeted. Furthermore, that most of the providers are completely unaware of the benefits and opportunities associated with moving to a more digitally-oriented service provision.

In this article, we explore the deliberative model approach, as emphasised in the DbD report, as the impetus for housing service providers to get UK adults to go online. For example could deliberation about individualised governmental programmes such as the Family Mosaic programme or other digital champions' initiatives be improved? Or could the deliberative successes of corporate and government housing providers form the basis for new business models to address the 'digital divide' in the UK?

At its foundation, the DbD housing initiative begins with a housing provider developing the technology provision and associated services for its tenants such as hardware, software and wi-fi connections. The technology infrastructure is identified as solving many of the foundational problems of digital exclusion for a core of otherwise disconnected residents, as well as embedding how housing provision will be provided in the future. The initiative stresses that it will be important to back such technology provisions with reasons to go online, including incentives, motivation, and skills development for all stakeholders. Examples of support, information, business contacts and business motivations for stakeholders are therefore being regularly disseminated and outlined in informative publications such as Housing Technology.

Another positive element of the DbD initiative is the introduction of awards for social housing landlords who provide help for tenants to build skills and stimulate motivation for continued usage. However if successes of the initiative are to grow and develop, it will be important to build such awards and to capture and reproduce models of best practice and innovation for potential interested landlords and tenants. It is therefore important for new service providers to receive encouragement and support from existing landlords who have made the transition to online service provision and can elucidate the process. Furthermore, it will be useful to capitalise on success stories that are not being measured purely in economic terms or seen as having only immediate returns, but where there is longer term and sustained focus on the knock-on effects of the value of digital inclusion.

Social housing providers play a key role, offering "low-cost computer and connectivity deals to tenants". IT is critical in every area of the new society; proclaimed as "the key to unlocking employment, education and training opportunities and tackling worklessness and social exclusion in communities" (DbD,

p5). However, there are questions about whether the classical sociological concepts are sufficient to explain today's inequality in an information society.

Van Dijk (2006, p222) emphasises that "one should carefully distinguish between different kinds of digital divide, for example in the shape of a number of types of access." In varying degrees, Fox and others within the DbD report do acknowledge the need for different types of access but fail to mention conditional access such as pay-per-view and subscriptions. Secondly, skills are not explained in full detail; for example, Van Dijk (2006, p 224) notes how an order of skills must be developed succinctly, beginning with the user developing operational skills, followed by the application of information skills and finally strategic skills.

To be socially included in the information society requires development through all of these stages, especially important in terms of employment in the 'knowledge economy'. And while one technology might be mastered, constant developments of devices, connection speeds, content and programs for example, require persistent levels of support for the most vulnerable to stay 'socially included'.

In assuming the divide is fundamentally a technology limitation, the digital divide might then be redefined as a 'broadband divide' (NTIA, 1999). This understanding within the DbD report accounts for a potential disparity of ideas and delineated in case examples about what constitutes effective action for solutions and the deliberative rhetoric of overcoming the barriers of 'digital opportunity' for the individual (DbD, p12). Varying abilities of skills access will create other societal divides and shifts, one of these being the impact on wage dispersion in rich countries where IT is creating a dramatic rise in income inequality (Bresnahan, 1999; Sanders, 2005).

Manchester University reviews the 'Digital by Default' report

Continued from the opposite page

Balancing the digital divide debate becomes more problematic when too much emphasis is placed on the individual to acquire IT skills as a means to address the divide. This happens by moving the responsibility for addressing the problem from governments to individuals and educational institutions (Epstein et al, 2011). An over-individualised emphasis within the DbD report explains why the importance of the national digital champions network and the community support programs have not been prioritised.

However this oversight can also be understood as an error in application; for if the initiative is to truly be successful, there will need to be support from the public to push for government intervention to "pursue infrastructural improvements, subsidise large-scale material improvements, and address the political contexts on a national and international scale. All of which must be addressed to rectify the broader socio-political inequities that undergird the digital divide" (Epstein et al 2011, p101).

Therefore, support from the public along with support from private institutions is key to a truly successful deliberative model and, as shown in the report, will greatly enhance the success of the policy implementation as a totality.

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Digital inclusion – Pilot of special broadband pricing

Stuart Hitchman, Head of Information and Communication Technology, Rooftop Housing Group

Latest figures from the ONS suggest that 83 per cent of UK homes are connected to the internet; of the remaining 17 per cent, a disproportionate number of those are households in the social housing sector.

We know that some of those ‘unconnected’ say that they ‘simply do not need to be online’. However, a significant proportion would like to be online, but either lack the necessary skills or can’t afford it. It is these two categories that housing providers have the most opportunity to influence.

Many housing providers have been making great strides in addressing the issues of training and equipment. Rooftop has instigated and supported a number of web-based training and education events. We have also worked closely with organisations such as local libraries and voluntary groups to help increase internet usage and availability by holding workshops, open days and running online courses.

More recently, Rooftop has increased the availability of reconditioned business computers and TV internet adaptors, and provided wi-fi bubbles in our sheltered schemes to allow residents to access the internet from their own homes.

These developments follow a revamp of the Rooftop website to include features enabling residents to have direct access to enhanced online services. These features include paying rent and being able to see real-time rent statements, reporting repairs and viewing repairs status and history, and allowing residents to see the long-term planned maintenance schedule for every component of their property. The most recent addition provides residents with the opportunity to book appointments to visit key Rooftop staff such as housing officers and income officers. We have also introduced new software to the website so that visitors accessing it via a smartphone or tablet device arrive at a more user-friendly homepage.

The successful promotion of these features has resulted in around 1,800 tenants registering to have access to their online account – that’s almost 30 per cent of Rooftop’s households. Those 30 per cent are also now sent a monthly email bulletin

direct to their email address featuring the latest news and information from Rooftop. So, Rooftop has seen a huge increase in residents engaging with us via the internet. This is producing efficiencies for both parties and reflects the growing trend of internet usage among social housing tenants. Current estimates put this at around 64 per cent, up from 54 per cent in 2010. But this is still below the figure for the general UK population.

To address the remaining gap, the issue that really must be tackled is affordability. The answer could lie in a new National Discounted Broadband tariff for residents in the social housing sector. Rooftop has been working closely with Procurement for Housing with this aim in mind and we are now ready to begin a pilot project.

By working with the telecoms framework suppliers, PfH and Rooftop believe they can establish a practical and affordable National Discounted Broadband tariff for residents. The rate will be based on BT’s standard line rental and call charges, with broadband at no extra cost. This will compare very favourably with those available on the open market, effectively providing ‘free’ broadband.



From L-R: Paul Haslam, Trent & Dove Housing, John Stanley, Rooftop Housing Group, Rachel Lathan, Evesham & Pershore Housing, and Steve Malone, Procurement for Housing

The initial pilot phase of the National Discounted Broadband tariff will operate regionally. To facilitate this pilot project, Rooftop residents, through their Community Fund, have approved grants which will allow Rooftop to ‘pump prime’ this new tariff, and reduce the risk factor for the suppliers.

Alongside Rooftop, Trent & Dove Housing will also be promoting the National

Discounted Broadband tariff to its residents. Rooftop and Trent & Dove are members of the Matrix Housing Partnership, a development and regeneration group which aims to achieve efficiencies in procurement, management and service delivery. The hope is to bring in the other members of Matrix – Trident, Accord, Caldmore, and Ashram housing associations – as the scheme progresses.

The framework supplier from PfH, Social Telecoms (a social enterprise organisation), will be offering the tariff to residents of both Rooftop and Trent & Dove. The agreement will be between the tenant and Social Telecoms and not with the housing provider. During the pilot stages, the scheme will be offered to residents selectively, and only those residents given a once-only code will have access to the rate. The pilot will be closely monitored and checked to ensure that it is self supporting. Once the economic viability of this rate has been confirmed, PfH would then aim to make the rate available nationally to its members’ residents.

A final consideration for Rooftop was that around 85 per cent of our 6,000 properties are in Worcestershire. Many of these properties are in rural locations and are affected by poor broadband coverage. However, high-speed fibre broadband will be rolled out to more than 90 per cent of Worcestershire homes and businesses within the next three years as a result of a multi-million pound ‘Superfast Worcestershire’ partnership between Worcestershire County Council and BT.

Ultimately, if we want to get the 64 per cent of social housing residents with internet access much nearer to 83 per cent of the general population, it is going to take a combination of improved online services, greater broadband coverage, better facilities and more training. But if we can achieve cheaper access, that will be the key to making the internet available to everyone.

Stuart Hitchman is head of information and communication technology at Rooftop Housing Group.

Digital Deal – Successful bids announced

The 12 successful bidders for the government's 'Digital Deal' were announced in August, with £400,000 of funding from the Department for Work & Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government alongside the same amount matched by the winning bidders.

The Digital Deal is intended to encourage more tenants in social housing to get online, improve their skills and benefit from wider internet services. The 12 successful bids cover a range of projects including community volunteer support and expert mentors, mobile wi-fi clouds, converting TVs into internet devices and recycled IT equipment.

The successful housing providers comprised:

- A2 Dominion Housing Group is running a 'train the trainer' programme with a network of trained staff and resident mentors, providing seven new 'Digital' access points in community facilities and starting a computer recycling project.
- Bron Afon Community Housing is setting up a wi-fi and broadband network, with its

chief executive, Duncan Forbes, saying, "The majority of job-hunting already takes place online so it's vital we increase the number of places where the internet is available free of charge."

- Cottsway Housing is using a digital television channel, website and mobile app from Looking Local to give its rural residents free access to digital services.
- Fabrick Housing Group is setting up 12 free internet kiosks, providing free internet training for residents, employing three apprentices as ICT engagement champions and providing training for 60 digital champions.
- Golden Gates Housing Trust is connecting its residents' televisions to the internet using Android-based mini PCs from Digital Den.
- Leeds Federated Housing is setting up a mobile internet café with free wi-fi.
- London Borough of Camden is offering low-cost, recycled computers to its residents.
- Queens Cross Housing's 'Local Connections' project will improve digital inclusion based around four new community digital hubs.

- Progress Housing Group is offering IT training to its tenants and setting up a network of tenant zones.
- South Essex Homes' chief executive, Mike Gatrell said, "A recent survey showed that 55 per cent of our residents have no internet access. The Digital Deal funding will provide six months of digital training and volunteering opportunities delivered from a number of locations across the borough."
- Wirral Partnership Homes is offering recycled IT equipment via a local social enterprise.
- Yarlington Housing Group's head of communities, Ken Comber, said, "Some of our tenants will be trained as 'digital champions' who will help their communities to access IT information. Rural residents will be able to access computers through our equipment loan scheme and a tour of Gadget Shows will give tenants the opportunity to learn more about IT and experience the internet."

Meet Monty the Money Dog at East Kent Housing



East Kent Housing has reported on how its multi-channel approach to tenant communications has reduced its rent arrears by over £100,000 since it took over rent collection when it launched in April 2011, and evictions for rent arrears have fallen by 64 per cent.

East Kent's strategy had a number of facets. These included focusing less on letters and more on out of hours contact and the use of text messaging, with over 1,500 texts sent each month which proved vital in engaging with younger and harder to reach tenants.

A 'Monty the Money Dog' fictional character was created to give tenants advice on how to pay rent for the first time and general money advice, including a dedicated Monty page on Facebook for regular money-saving advice and budgeting tips.

Through analysis of its tenant arrears data, East Kent identified the local areas and tenant groups facing financial difficulty and targeted its approach to the most vulnerable categories of tenants. A new tenant sign up process was developed, which included setting up monthly payments and early intervention contact if the tenant fell into arrears.

East Kent also created a new benefits and money advisory team which gives tenants personalised advice on maximising their income and how to budget better. Since January 2013, over 500 tenants have been helped by the team, including 150 tenants supported to downsize and/or receive extra income.



Sovereign extends IT contract with Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets Community Housing has signed a new seven-year contract with Sovereign Business Integration Group for an augmented IT service with additional flexibility and scope, extending its previous six-year contract with Sovereign.

The new contract includes enhanced IT asset management, an upgrade to Tower Hamlets' highly-resilient network, a dedicated service delivery manager from Sovereign to run a continual service improvement programme, and ongoing application development and on-site support.

Tower Hamlets reported that since outsourcing its IT to Sovereign in 2007 and thereby removing the internal pressures of running

an in-house IT department and dealing with IT problems on site, the housing provider has made significant time and cost savings, enabling it to focus its resources on delivering the core services for its tenants.

Harneck Chilemba, director of finance, Tower Hamlets Community Housing, said, "We have immense trust in Sovereign and the support it provides to our business, not only through IT, but also in ensuring that IT aligns with our overall business objectives. For example, it helped us tremendously last year with the roll out of universal credit and Sovereign's consultancy service was a key part of the project's success."



South Lakes live with new Intrinsic network & telephony

Earlier this year, Intrinsic Technology completed the installation of a completely new network infrastructure and telephony platform at South Lakes Housing. The new network is based on Cisco network and security technologies and Avaya for IP telephony.

South Lakes recently added 3,000 homes to its portfolio following a stock transfer from South Lakeland District Council, resulting in it relocating to larger offices in Kendal to cope with its substantial expansion.

As well as the IT challenges associated with relocating, South Lakes also wanted to move towards technological independence as it still had some ICT links with the council. This meant the implementation of a new network, telephony platform, wide area network, and the migration of its virtual VMware and NetApp infrastructure for its core housing applications, Active Directory and Exchange.

Intrinsic was chosen to design, implement and maintain a new local and wide area network, telephony and contact centre platform, and migrate key services to a virtual server and storage infrastructure. After evaluating SLH's existing network and

future requirements, Intrinsic proposed a data infrastructure based on the latest Cisco network and security technologies. An Avaya IP Office system was proposed as the IP telephony platform, which also served as South Lakes' contact centre function for better staff collaboration and customer service.

A new wide area network was set up to connect all of South Lakes' key sites, including all of its sheltered housing schemes through a fibre and private broadband-connected network. Wireless access points were also installed at the schemes to support South Lakes' digital inclusion plans. A secure remote working solution was also implemented to support the housing provider's mobile workers.

The new infrastructure is underpinned by Fusion, Intrinsic's managed services offering, which monitors the new infrastructure to

ensure that South Lakes' infrastructure is always available by identifying and responding to any problems before they affect the availability of services.

Lindsay Simons, director of Finance, South Lakes Housing, said, "The relocation of our headquarters provided us with the perfect opportunity to overhaul and transform our ICT, and Intrinsic has been the ideal partner to see us through that process.

"We've seen improvements both internally and in terms of tenant experience. The ongoing support from Intrinsic has provided an extra layer of security, so we can get on with serving our tenants with the knowledge that our ICT systems will be running smoothly."

JetNexus replaces Windows for load-balancing at Newport City Homes



In April 2013, Newport City Homes replaced its poorly-performing Windows Server NLB with an advanced load-balancing appliance from JetNexus. The original system had resulted in the housing provider's home page taking up to 20 seconds to load.

Having previously used an external hosting company, NCH decided to bring its web services in-house due to an expansion in its business operations and increasing interfacing requirements, and began a project to create a Microsoft Sharepoint-based website.

Following Microsoft's recommendations for SharePoint deployment, NCH needed a load-balancing system and used Windows Server NLB on their front-end web servers. However once the infrastructure element

of the project was completed and testing started, it became apparent that Windows Server NLB was not suitable in this instance.

Owen Barrett, IS manager, Newport City Homes, said, "It was taking roughly 20 seconds to download the homepage of our website using Windows Server NLB, which wasn't acceptable to us or our end-users.

"Based on past experiences, I expected that a load balancing system with the functionality that we needed would be too expensive. However, JetNexus's Accelerating Load Balancer Extreme (ALB-X) appliance represented excellent value for money, while fitting in with our current platform and virtual environment."

NCH has now installed two JetNexus ALB-X virtual appliances on-site to manage their corporate SharePoint website platform. The housing provider now plans to deploy more JetNexus appliances in the near future for its Microsoft Lync 2010 and Exchange 2010 services.

Barrett said, "Once we'd evaluated the appliance, we never looked back. The ALB-X exceeded our initial expectations and deployment was very easy; we were up and running in less than an hour.

"We saw an immediate improvement when we deployed the ALB-X appliances, including a massive 18 second reduction in load times, which in turn enables us to provide a faster and more user-friendly online experience for our tenants."

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Housing Technology 2014 – Bigger, better & longer!

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2014 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM



*Housing Technology 2014, our fifth annual conference and executive forum, returns to the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry on **26-27 February 2014**.*

Building on the growing popularity of our four previous events, we have extended Housing Technology 2014 to two days (with the option of attending either or both days) to allow more presentations, greater scope for networking and more time to visit the sponsor and exhibition area. There will also be a gala dinner on the evening of 26 February.

The key themes for our 2014 conference and executive forum are:

- IT transformation & business change
- Universal credit, welfare reform and digital inclusion
- Omni-channel communications, social media and customer experience
- BYOD & IT consumerisation
- Core applications: housing, finance, asset & performance management and mobile working
- Data analytics and visualisation
- Cloud computing & network infrastructure

Having booked the entirety of Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry for the duration of the event, Housing Technology 2014 will allow much more time between presentations than previous events and have more space in the exhibition area. We have also reserved all of the bedrooms for Housing Technology 2014 participants.

Online registration for Housing Technology 2014 will open towards the end of September. In the mean time, please email conference@housing-technology.com to either provisionally reserve your place as a delegate, put yourself forward as a potential speaker or find out about sponsorship and exhibiting.

Curo Group goes mobile with GIS

Curo Group is now using ESRI's Arcpad software and mobile devices to capture and update its grounds mapping information. A team of nine surveyors capture the information on site and send the information back to Curo's head office. The information is then aggregated to update the respective layers such as amenity grass, hedges and car parking. The layers are then available for all Curo staff to view as part of the Curo Maps feature on its intranet site.

Krystian Kozlowski, project manager of Curo's ground mapping project, said "There are numerous benefits for Curo to fully understand our external area assets. For example, it can help in

planning cyclical works and replacements, supports in-service charge setting and allows for the immediate identification of an asset."

Neil Higham, director of ICT, Curo Group, said, "We have a lot of information in our Curo Maps system and we would like to use GIS even more in the future for visualising performance information so that we can target resources. For this project it was really useful and much more efficient to be able to capture the information while on site and not have to return to the office to update the maps."

Barnet Group socialises with Clearvale

Further to the introductory feature on The Barnet Group in the July issue of Housing Technology, Broadvision has announced that the housing provider is using its Clearvale enterprise social networking software to boost operational efficiencies and improve internal communications.

The cloud-based software enables employees to work socially on everyday business tasks, frequently eliminating duplication of email dialogues, internal

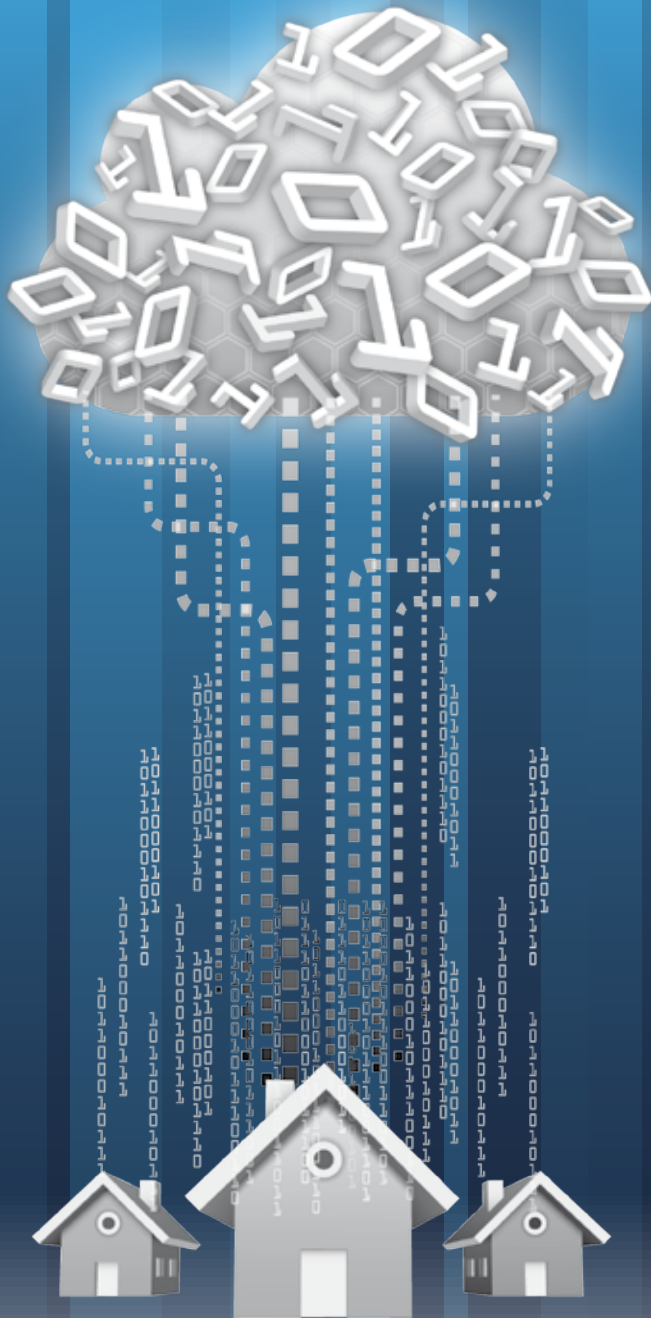
FAQs and endless meetings to decide on courses of action.

Troy Henshall, director of business services, The Barnet Group, said, "The creation of the Group and the increase in staff numbers exacerbated the need for more internal communication and knowledge sharing.

"Clearvale gives our employees access to information they need to do their jobs and enables them to find information

or answers to questions from different departments. This eliminates the need to ask the same question multiple times by different employees; with Clearvale, our employees need to only ask the question once which improves productivity and encourages engagement across the whole organisation."

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