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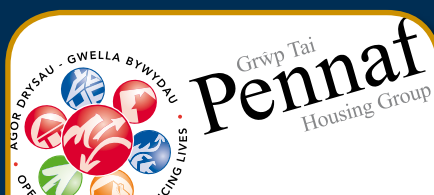
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Editor's Notes

Money in, money out

As we mention in our feature article on risk management (pages 24-28), performance management and risk management can be considered as two sides of the same coin. While performance management software enables housing providers to fine-tune and quantify their operations for greater productivity and efficiency, risk management software gives them the tools to implement the correct checks and balances so that they don't 'overheat' in the pursuit of performance gains.

Risk management is particularly applicable in two of the areas where housing providers can either save money or make money. First, more efficient procurement processes can reduce up-front capital costs and longer-term operational costs, but they need to be carried out with an awareness of the possible risks.

Secondly, with many housing providers considering how to extend their operations to create additional revenue streams, perhaps through shared services, new commercial ventures or selling spare capacity (such as repairs, maintenance or contact centres) to other housing providers, risk management technology can help to ensure that they are able to correctly measure and judge their own appetite for risk.

ERP or not ERP?

It was interesting to note during the panel discussion at the Housing Technology 2014 conference in February (see pages 31 and 32) that the panel was divided on the question of using 'standard' ERP systems, such as from SAP or Oracle, instead of standalone applications for repairs, housing, finance, CRM and so on.

One perspective was that the difficulties of getting most housing providers' myriad applications to properly integrate together for genuine straight-through processing therefore favoured the implementation of ERP systems. The other perspective centred on the specific nature and ethos of social housing and its technology implications, and how it is 'different' from other types of business and therefore needs to do things differently.

Both views have their merits, but we suspect that we may see more partnerships and/or collaborative projects between existing housing technology providers, with their deep industry knowledge and experience, and some of the larger ERP vendors.

Too cool for school

As survey after survey shows the changing demographics of internet access among tenants, it is apparent that for many younger tenants, their smartphone simply is the internet. Furthermore, 'Generation Y' is much more likely to use tools such as WhatsApp and Kik to communicate, instead of traditional email or SMS.

While most housing providers' websites can be viewed on the small screen of a smartphone, few sites offer any optimisation for smartphones and few have iOS or Android apps for areas such as repairs, tenant communications, payments and enquiries.

The cost of developing housing apps is low compared with other technologies, and the cost of setting up accounts on new platforms, is almost nothing and they can happily co-exist with housing providers' other communication channels.

FUTURE EVENTS

Britannic Technologies: Optimise the Mobile Workforce through Cloud
20 March 2014, London
www.btlnet.co.uk

MET: Security Seminar with Assa Abloy & Bloomfield
2 April 2014, Jaguar Land Rover, Birmingham
www.met.co.uk or 0121 227 0730

Xmbrace - InMotion 2014
29 April 2014, Heritage Motor Centre, Warwickshire
inmotion-forum.com/inmotion-2014

Georgia Group: High Impact Leadership Programme Seminar
22 May 2014, Wentworth
www.georgia-group.com or 01625 441 724

Orchard wins £2 million deal with BPHA

BPHA has chosen Orchard as the lead contractor to deliver a new system which will incorporate housing management, mobile working, customer relationship management (CRM) and electronic document management. The £2 million implementation is expected to be completed by the end of 2014.

Orchard will work with South View Solutions to provide mobile working, Documotive for document management, and Octavia for its widely used OSKA application for supporting people with their individual care plans.

Unlike many other implementations of new housing management systems and associated applications, BPHA is primarily using an in-house team of IT and business staff to deliver the organisation-wide project.

Clive Thacker, project manager, BPHA, said, "This project is one of the largest investments in our systems. We were therefore keen to choose a solution that can support us not only now but also in the future. We believe that the Orchard solution does this and with their team of experts, we are confident that when we go live, it will meet our expectations."

Orchard's clean sweep at the Housing Innovation Awards

The Housing Innovation Awards, which took place in February 2014 in central London, focus on highlighting examples of inventive and original schemes and services. Out of the sixteen awards presented, seven of them were for Orchard and its recently-acquired In4Systems' customers.

Among the awards won by the two companies' customers, Circle was named as the most innovative large housing provider, Thrive Homes for community engagement, Peaks & Plains Housing for IT innovation, Newlon Housing Trust for affordable housing, and Magenta Living for supported and sheltered housing schemes.

Cornwall Housing signed with Capita for HMS

Capita's software services business has won a 10-year contract to provide Cornwall Housing with its full OpenHousing software suite.

The contract includes the implementation of housing management software so that Cornwall Housing can store and access data about its properties and tenants in one place, and the training and project management of professional housing management services.

OpenHousing will also give tenants access to the latest self-service tools, including a web portal for tenants to use to query rent accounts, report repairs and make payments.

Emma Blatchford, head of resources, Cornwall Housing, said, "Capita's software will underpin the day-to-day management of our properties and will help to streamline the services that our residents use, whether applying for a home, paying rent or reporting anti-social behaviour. Our staff will also benefit because the software will give them the choice of working remotely from home or wirelessly across our communities while on-the-job."

Capita's contract with Cornwall Housing was signed in October 2013 and is valued at £460,000 over 10 years.

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

The return of the machine for living

Matt Leach, CEO, HACT

In the early 20th century, architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier, wrote about the house as 'a machine for living'. At the time, influenced by the development of new building materials and in particular reinforced concrete, steel and glass, this expressed itself through bleak visions of grey monoliths into which the working classes could be efficiently dormitoried.

The Unité d'Habitation, Le Corbusier's grim Marseille apartment block, seemed to sum up the rejection of human and organic approaches to house-building: if the house was a machine, its residents were little more than the materials it processed. That underlying philosophy proved hugely influential, reaching its natural conclusion in the soulless tower blocks and estates of the 1960s and 70s that subsequently became associated with the worst of our social housing.

But if the last century's dreams of creating a technologically-enabled 'machine for living' foundered, advances in cloud-based computing and low cost manufacturing are spurring an exciting re-exploration of how the concept might be achieved in very different ways, and to ends which place the well-being of residents at their very heart.

Big data in housing

Over the last four months, 34 post-graduate computer scientists at London's UCL have been working full-time to design and build the core infrastructure that will underpin this vision. Part of an initiative that brings together insight from the HACT & Microsoft Housing Big Data initiative (currently on track to establish the first ever national housing data repository later this spring), ongoing work by Microsoft and other partners on assisted living, and cutting-edge research at UCL, the project aims to explore the limits of what can be achieved through integration of sensor technology in the home, the latest heating and lighting management systems and housing providers' own housing management systems.

The project seeks to reimagine the social housing home of the future. One in which sensors in every room keep track of heating and lighting to ensure that the optimum environment is maintained for the resident at the lowest cost; where noise problems can be monitored and resolved within days at the flick of a switch; which tracks household occupancy to ensure that unplanned voids, sublets or falls can be identified and responded to immediately; where damp or humidity problems are identified within days and fixed before more damage is caused; where electricity usage is monitored and analysed to identify and remedy unnecessary inefficiency; and vulnerable tenants looked out for, when otherwise they might be on their own. Homes which provide streaming data on room usage to feed intelligent maintenance schedules; and estates in which maintenance engineers are able to respond to intelligently prioritised jobs, based on live data direct from the home. All controlled by intelligent cloud-based algorithms directly integrated into re-imagined housing management systems.

Low-cost innovation

If it sounds like science fiction, the intention is to make it happen in 2014. Just as massive drops in the price of technology are enabling innovation in ways that were previously inconceivable (the first £30 tablets should be rolling out to social housing residents in the next few months), advances in low-cost, fast manufacturing are enabling the rapid and affordable scaling up of innovation that in the past would have been limited to small-scale, expensive pilots.

In the next few months, we'll be seeing the first production prototypes of the multi-sensor units that will provide a constant stream of information from residents' homes, and the development of the actuator components capable of controlling radiators and lighting systems remotely, on the basis of the data flowing back into the cloud.

The next wave of research by UCL will be creating the analytic and control systems on Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, and the first homes will be kitted out on an experimental basis. By the end of the year, it is hoped that the first large-scale housing provider-wide roll-out will be underway in partnership with leading housing/digital innovator Halton Housing Trust, with wider involvement across the housing sector in 2015.

Next-generation systems

While the vision is expansive, it is based on technology that is available now. Google's recent acquisition of Nest demonstrates how intelligent technology for the home is becoming mainstream. And German start-up Tado has already made inroads into the UK and elsewhere with its smartphone-based thermostat controls. The next generation of housing management systems will need to embrace and integrate with what is going to be a new wave of data from the home; if recent web-based self-service systems have integrated the resident into housing management systems, the next wave of technology will integrate the home itself.

If this vision shares its roots in Le Corbusier's dream of creating a machine for living, it is founded on very different principles. If the home is indeed becoming a data-enabled machine, then its main purpose must be to continuously serve, respond and adapt to individual residents' needs.

Unlike the experiments of the last century, this time around it is not about treating people as the product; we're reprogramming the machine. Its outputs need to be measurable and achievable improvements in individuals' quality of life. And 2014 might just be the year we get there.

Matt Leach is CEO of HACT.

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ROCC wins contract with New Forest Council

New Forest District Council has awarded ROCC a five-year deal for the supply and implementation of its Uniclass system, following the expansion of its in-house teams. The solution is based on ROCC's Uniclass Repairs and Maintenance system combined with its new Uniclass Mobile Working solution.

After several years of growth within the council's building works team to its present roster of around 70 staff, services and activities that were previously carried out by external contractors have now been brought back in-house, including gas servicing, reactive repairs, electrical testing and inspection, bathroom refurbishments and heating installations.

Fiona Hughes, service level manager, New Forest District Council, said, "During this period of growth, the systems used to run the business hadn't really changed. New systems were therefore necessary to modernise our operations, achieve greater efficiencies and improve customer service.

"ROCC Uniclass was our preferred system, due to its easy-to-navigate screen layout, mobile and scheduling functionality, and ROCC's overall approach to project management and implementation."

FINANCE MANAGEMENT

Pennaf Housing selects RAM for component accounting

Pennaf has chosen Real Asset Management to manage its array of property assets and deliver an automated component accounting system, replacing a spreadsheet-based approach. The Asset4000 software is scheduled to go live in April 2014.

Pennaf provides general corporate support services and specialist services to members of Pennaf Housing Group. When SORP regulations were introduced in 2008, Pennaf saw its asset base expand from 5,500 to in excess of 60,000. After trialling a traditional spreadsheet method of recording its depreciating assets, Pennaf recognised the need for a dedicated system that would allow it to record its large array of properties including residential homes and hostels.

Stephen Morris, finance controller, Pennaf Housing Group, said, "The wide variety of our properties was making it difficult for us to keep track of our depreciating assets. We were using a mix of spreadsheets and an in-house housing rental system which, when combined, were simply not designed for asset management. After struggling to produce all the necessary information needed for component accounting, we decided to look for a proper asset management system.

"We quickly realised that RAM's Asset4000 system was extremely flexible and was exactly what we needed. With different types of properties, each with a different asset base and a different lifecycle, we needed a system which would be able to handle a vast amount of different data."

As well as implementing Asset4000, Pennaf has also bought RAM's forecasting module which will create 'what if' scenarios for future capital expenditure, revaluations and asset disposals, and create depreciation projections to simplify annual budget decisions.

SDS Sequel takes over from Workbench at Longhurst

Longhurst Group has replaced its Workbench project monitoring tool with SDS Sequel, having used SDS software to financially appraise and benchmark its housing developments since 2004.

Kate Varney, development and new business officer, Longhurst Group, said, "Sequel has reduced the time it takes to update our cash flows, and it's very easy to manage the budgets and identify any changes to the board-approved and budget figures. All our financial appraisals are carried out in SDS ProVal and once the site has some certainty, the data is imported into SDS Sequel.

"We're now exploring other areas of the system and using information stored in the property section to keep our housing management and sales team up to date. In turn, they are using the system to monitor sales and show variances between budget OMVs and actuals, along with the differences in first tranche sales against budget.

"One of the great benefits of the system is having all the scheme and unit information in one location. In future, we will be using the workflow section as an audit checklist and the property section to store handover and sales information for use by housing management, maintenance and the sales teams."

Orchard BPM for Rents success at First Wessex

First Wessex is using Orchard's Business Process Management for Rents to improve its workflows and streamline its process for greater speed and efficiency.

A rent refunds workflow has been developed to allow First Wessex staff to request a refund which is then authorised by appropriate members of staff before being automatically sent to the finance department for processing. The housing provider has also created an automatic 'sundry payment' tool within its OpenAccounts financial management system.

First Wessex's rent and sales team are saving around two minutes per refund workflow case, and with an average of 85 refunds per month, saving almost three hours each month.

At the same time, the purchase ledger team is saving about three minutes per refund workflow case, equating to over 4 hours per month, while First Wessex's customer services team can now process tenants' refunds quicker, enabling targets to be met, as well as reduce the number of queries from tenants about their refunds.

No more spread-sheets at CDS with Infor

CDS Co-Operatives has bought Infor's SunSystems application to replace spreadsheet-based reporting, improve customer service and accelerate payments through electronic invoicing processes.

The new system will remove a mass of manual, error-prone data-entry processes, freeing up staff to focus on value-adding activities such as business analysis. Paper-based invoicing processes will also be replaced.

CDS chose Infor SunSystems on the basis of its reporting functionality, the application's ease of use and Infor's commitment to an accelerated deployment timetable, with particular emphasis on how Infor Q&A enables CDS' users to write and run their own reports quickly and easily.

Suzanne Twerdochilb, finance director, CDS Co-Operatives, said, "Moving away from our legacy application and our reliance on spreadsheets was a major challenge for us. We

had to identify and select a new application quickly, but we were also looking for a stable supplier with a long-term investment in its financial applications.

"The recent developments that have gone into Infor's user interface and functionality upgrades demonstrate that Infor is truly committed to SunSystems. The ability to integrate with other systems, in particular our housing management software was also critical, as we expect further change."

Shian Housing cuts arrears with Omniledger texts

Following the implementation of Omniledger's Pyramid Messenger powered by Deeplake's Communication Manager, Shian Housing Association has improved its tenants' responses to arrears management communications, resulting in a reduction in overall arrears.

Indran Thavendra, finance director, Shian Housing Association, said, "The majority of our tenants use a mobile phone every day so we wanted a solution that would enable us to communicate with them in their preferred communication format. "Since using Pyramid Messenger, we have noticed a significant reduction

in our arrears, coupled with a large increase in positive responses to arrears management communications. Tenants are responding better to text messages regarding their arrears and this has allowed our housing officers to tackle these arrears much earlier than before."

Pyramid Messenger also automatically sends a text message to tenants who have failed to make a payment during the month, giving Shian Housing tighter control of rent arrears and lets tenants know that it is monitoring their accounts more closely.

Thavendra said, "When a tenant reports a repair, it is immediately added to our Pyramid housing management system. Pyramid will then initiate a text message through Deeplake's Communication Manager that confirms the appointment details, time and date.

"Using this new system has allowed us to reduce the number of unfulfilled appointments by our contractors. It has also improved our overall repairs service to tenants and helped us to become more efficient at the same time as reducing call out costs."

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Is universal credit changing the housing technology landscape?

Mark Summers, Head of Technology Sales, JMC IT

Universal credit remains in its relative infancy, moving from a pilot phase to a staged UK-wide rollout in April 2014. Yet it is already clear that welfare reform is changing the country's social housing landscape for good and, according to some, not necessarily for the better.

Technology has a crucial part to play, particularly given that universal credit claims can only be completed online. Tenants, their landlords and housing officers alike have been forced to learn a great deal about themselves and their technological capabilities in the past year as they have either had to comply or are preparing to. It will be crucial to build on this IT literacy if all parties want to gain the knowledge they need to survive and thrive.

Validating value

Since universal credit pilots began in April 2013, housing providers have seen increased pressure to find value for money from every single expenditure. Added to the need to become more commercially viable, those monitoring the trials of universal credit will have noticed the predictions regarding rent arrears. These have risen by as much as 600 per cent in some areas since the pilots began, prompting providers to hold back vast amounts of money to cover the seemingly inevitable deficits. Funding has become much harder to secure as a result and revenue is unpredictable, with procurement challenges a reality for most social housing providers.

The housing sector has already proved its ability to familiarise itself with technology and act in an agile manner to create savings during the past year. There has been a shift from capital expenditure (CapEx) to a preference for operational expenditure (OpEx), prompted in no small part by the changing IT marketplace. Microsoft's new licensing rules in 2012 enforced the removal of discounts for housing providers on a two-year notice period, and those who fixed their deals at the time now face expensive renewals. In addition, the growing popularity of cloud models has provoked a move towards monthly software rental fees in place of outright purchases. For organisations wanting to budget and ensure financial stability, paying for IT resources and support via OpEx has become a far more attractive prospect because it circumvents concerns over the vast funds that would be needed for CapEx projects.

Fostering flexibility while ensuring efficiency

This responsive, agile attitude forms part of a wider trend for efficiency among housing providers, which is set to deepen in the year ahead. With every expenditure expected to show a return on investment, organisations are looking for technology that enables housing officers to multi-task and work flexibly. Staff must be equipped to do their job at their optimum ability and service the needs of tenants in the best possible way, limiting the chances of dissatisfied end-users and subsequent arrears.

Technology solutions that meet this need grew in popularity in 2013 and will continue to in 2014, with Microsoft Lync, Citrix XenDesktop and mobile device management solutions providing prime examples. Many organisations have driven efficiencies of work, and indeed IT investment, from these solutions to securely connect the entire workforce, regardless of location or device.

If a housing officer chooses to spend the day in front of tenants and working within the community to guide them through universal credit, they are just as contactable as their colleagues sitting in front of a computer and telephone in the head office. Microsoft Lync in particular has enabled 'right first time' policies for many housing providers, allowing anybody contacting the organisation, whether they are a tenant or a stakeholder, to be immediately be put in touch with someone to answer their query. This is made possible by Lync's compatibility with traditional and mobile devices, connecting people seamlessly through voice calls, instant messaging, video and even sharing desktops for collaboration. Virtualisation powered by the latest version of XenDesktop is aligned to HD multimedia and even the latest touch devices so that staff can access their complete IT system, including telephony and video conferencing, from any location, on any device.

Not only does this flexible approach improve relationships with tenants, it also brings commercial benefits that are crucial for organisations looking to boost efficiency. Many housing providers want to scale back their head office footprint and instead encourage staff to work remotely and within the community. This is a more intuitive way of serving the needs of tenants, with the added benefit that overheads are reduced and staff are more satisfied due to having a choice in how they work.

Building solid foundations

To maximise investments in technology that enable new ways of working, as well as capitalising on all other IT expenditure, such as software to process universal credit payments, social housing providers must ensure they have the right support in place. Housing providers are running numerous applications and placing

Is universal credit changing the housing technology landscape?

Continued from the opposite page

their IT infrastructure under the spotlight; in the current economy, as providers look to set themselves apart from the competition, it is crucial that they protect their assets – both physical and virtual. Many social housing providers will be familiar with network monitoring tools, relying on systems to ensure their IT infrastructure remains connected and fully functioning. This will continue to be crucial for those navigating universal credit and should not be overlooked.

But organisations keen to remain ahead are now bolstering the benefits of system monitoring with real-time application performance management (APM). This powerful enhancement builds on network monitoring to provide real-time insights into the health of every application being run, both on the network and even tenant facing websites, to ensure applications are benchmarked in real time against service metrics, demonstrating availability to management and enabling IT to take a proactive stance to the inevitable glitches. Pre-emptive notifications of issues can prevent service interruption, improving the overall service value of IT to the organisation, while driving internal IT efficiencies.

Whether an organisation outsources all of its IT or has an internal team, or indeed a partnership combining the two, APM provides for tailored dashboards to reflect the priorities of that particular organisation. This could be the performance of housing management systems, payment processing via a website, or perhaps a system that assigns a jobs list to all maintenance staff; whatever the application, APM continuously monitors how they operate and even records this data to be replayed on demand.

With technology so integral to the housing sector, the right support means organisations can continue to deliver business benefits at the same time as responding to a growing need for efficiency. Many IT firms offer solutions and support on an OpEx basis, meaning housing providers have the opportunity to benefit from best-in-class technology at an affordable cost without a vast one-off cost. This model will become increasingly popular as organisations build the solid foundations required to handle universal credit.

Mark Summers is head of technology sales for JMC IT.

Capita's £475,000 mobile deal with Wakefield & District Housing

In one of the largest mobile implementations in the social housing sector, Wakefield and District Housing is implementing Capita TotalMobile across its operations to allow employees to access all of the systems they use in the office while out visiting tenants. The contract is valued at £475,000 over five years.

Following the introduction of the government's welfare reform programme, WDH selected its central debt team as the test-bed for Capita TotalMobile in the middle of 2013, followed by its allocations team towards the end of the year. The system will be rolled out to WDH's neighbourhoods, cyclical servicing, repairs and wellbeing teams during 2014.

Geoff Kirk, service director for business systems, Wakefield and District Housing, said, "The use of mobile technology has been vital in helping our central debt team absorb the additional workload resulting from welfare reform. With employees able to get the information they need on smartphones or tablets while out and about in the community, they can respond faster to tenants' enquiries, access the information they need, and agree payment arrangements without having to travel back to the office.

"Within weeks of using TotalMobile, we saw significant results in our debt team, gaining between a day and a day and a half per week for each debt officer working out of the office. This has enabled them to carry out over 200 extra debt visits per week, and maintain our overall arrears within our pre-welfare reform target rate. And although tenancy terminations have increased by 20 per cent as a result of the bedroom tax, we have been able to maintain our average turnaround time to less than 20 days."

Vivark saves £225,000 with Oneserve

Nine months after Housing Technology first reported on Oneserve's cloud-based implementation at property repairs firm Vivark (see Housing Technology, May 2013), the company has reported some impressive results. The original Oneserve implementation was intended to streamline Vivark's voids management processes and give its management complete visibility of the progress of each job.

For Vivark's subcontractors, Oneserve helped set up a tailored workflow to manage the process of turning around units from start to finish, covering all stages, from pre-inspection to invoicing. The system helps the subcontractors manage their workload, while keeping Vivark completely up to date on progress.

Tony Cahill, executive director of commercial services, Vivark, said, "We are absolutely delighted with the far-reaching benefits; they have totally exceeded our expectations."

In the first year of operation, the Oneserve system has saved Vivark £225,000, including £150,000 through better productivity and performance and £50,000 in administrative time.

Ken Browne, head of client services at Knowsley Housing Trust, a client of Vivark, said, "I can wholeheartedly say that the Oneserve system has made a massive difference to Knowsley Housing and enabled us to fully integrate a mobile solution out on site with back-office facilities."

The managing director of one of Vivark's contractors said, "The solution has become an invaluable tool for our project information management, workforce planning and real-time communication of performance."
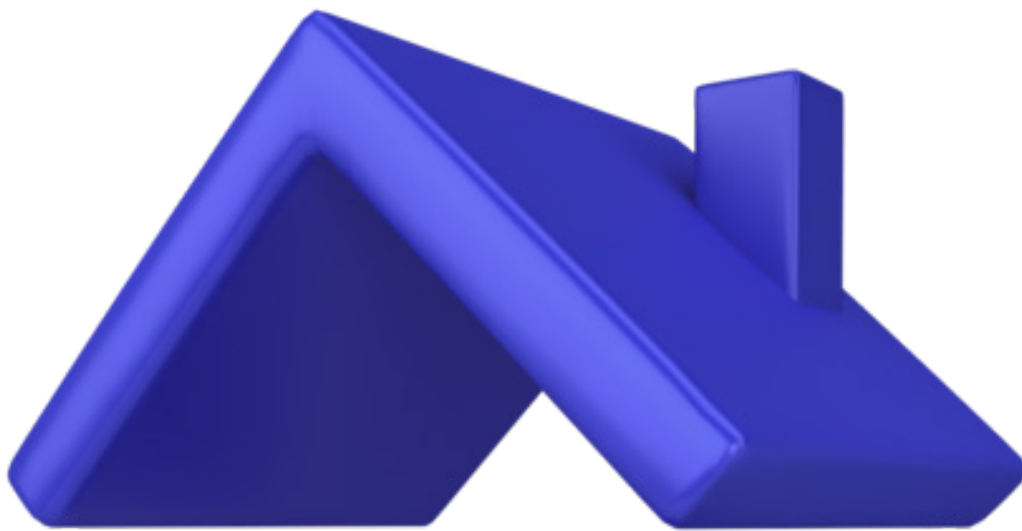
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Absolute mobility for Isos Housing

Absolute Software has completed the implementation of mobile device management software on 300 iPads and iPhones at Isos Housing. The MDM project is part of Isos Housing's Mobile Enablement of Workforce programme (MEOW) to improve staff mobility. The first phase focuses on replacing existing mobile phones with 300 mobile devices (20 iPads and 280 iPhones).

For the MEOW programme to work, Isos Housing needed an effective way to support staff working in the community. As well as managing the fleet of 300 mobile devices, Isos had to launch a range of new systems that staff needed to access the network remotely.

For example, the repairs and maintenance division needed a job management app for trade staff to record jobs, and the new CRM system will allow housing officers to manage their customer appointments remotely. iPads will provide access to more complex mobile functions, such as a Microsoft SharePoint-based application to enable its Safer Neighbourhoods team to host case notes and photographs for asset management.

Robin Greener, ICT CSI co-ordinator, Isos Housing, said, "Absolute Manage was the most cost effective system, and by far the best and most flexible product for our needs. We're extremely pleased with Absolute Manage; it makes managing 300 devices very straightforward."

Unusually, the implementation also includes a 'reverse BYOD' policy; for £10 per month, Isos staff can use work devices for personal use. As with a normal mobile contract, staff can send and receive texts and calls, access the internet and download their own apps. Along with better security management, Isos Housing has found that the programme has resulted in staff taking better care of their devices.

Absolute Software reported that the cost of the MDM system, 300 device MDM licences and annual support was around £10,000.

Identicom protects Raglan Housing's lone workers

Raglan Housing has purchased 70 of the award-winning Identicom lone worker devices from Connexion2 to protect 100 lone workers.

Raglan Housing conducted a short trial of the Identicom devices at the end of 2012 and then bought 70 lone worker devices at the beginning of 2013. The devices, purchased through Connexion2's fully managed SoloProtect package, help to protect surveyors, housing officers, project workers and support workers throughout Raglan Housing. SoloProtect is fully compliant with the British Standard for Lone Worker Device Services (BS8484:2011), ensuring the most effcient way to elicit a Police response in the UK.

The Identicom devices have a range of features, including the ability to easily and discreetly raise a 'red alert' if a user feels their safety has been compromised through a single button press. The devices also have configurable two-way audio, multi-function buttons to help with job orientated tasks and the ability to conduct a 'status check' and leave an 'amber alert'.

David Hall, Regional Director, Raglan Housing, said, "The Identicom lone worker device was chosen after a short and successful trial with SoloProtect which showed how easy the device was to use and how simple it was to integrate into users' daily routines. The device has increased confidence among users and managers when staff are working alone, knowing a Police response is just a button press away."

South Kesteven Council mobile with 1st Touch

South Kesteven District Council has completed the implementation of its first mobile working project for its repairs and maintenance operations with Android-based software and devices from 1st Touch. The council has reported that it is already completing an extra 60 jobs per day across its 30 multi-skilled workers.

When it decided to introduce mobile working for the first time, SKDC decided that Android was the best platform solution in terms of flexibility and value for money.

David Lewis, ICT manager, South Kesteven District Council, said, "We reviewed the options available and it was apparent that Android had become the leading mobile platform, and the value for money advantages it offered were significant. The devices available were ideal too, because they were small enough to be handy but large enough to be useful. In addition, as 1st Touch had launched an Android version of its service, this fitted well with our use of this exciting alternative to other mobile platforms."

Stuart Sheardown, a project manager in SKDC's property services team, said, "1st Touch could work perfectly with our Northgate housing management system, plus there was also the 'smart airtime' feature within 1st Touch Mobile. This is useful in rural areas with patchy network coverage; the software only sends and receives information in short encrypted bursts when there is a signal.

"Furthermore, we needed a contractor willing to not only provide the support detailed in the specification, but also to offer some degree of flexibility, as in many ways this was a design and learning process for us as we had not used mobile technology before."

Liz Bishop from SKDC's property services team said, "On average, we are achieving two more repairs per operative per day, resulting in 60 extra completed jobs per day, which is phenomenal. The operatives are now travelling fewer miles between jobs, thereby reducing fuel and servicing costs, and we're also less dependent on external contractors."

In the future, SKDC next plans to use the 1st Touch system for its voids management followed by automatic stocking of its workers' vans.

Dynamic repairs at Housing Solutions with Xmbrace DRS

Housing Solutions has launched a repairs booking portal for tenant self-service following the success of an internal project for its staff, powered by Xmbrace DRS for dynamic scheduling. As well as providing a convenient way for tenants to book repairs, the expected reduction in calls to Housing Solutions' contact centre will also lower service costs. The service was launched in August 2013.

Richard Harvey, IT manager, Housing Solutions, said, "This actually started out as an internal system but, because of its success, we enhanced it and launched it for our residents. The new facility allows them to register a repair and book an appointment time, all online and without any intervention from Housing Solutions' staff. The portal integrates in real time with our Civica Servitor repairs system and Xmbrace DRS scheduling software.

"We included a help wizard within the site so that tenants can identify the repair required before it is raised as a works order within Civica Servitor. The system links with Xmbrace DRS which uses the repair information submitted by the resident, checks the availability of operatives with the right skills, calculates travelling times, and then provides the available appointment slots to the tenant for the next week or month, so that they can book the most convenient time, all of which takes just a few seconds."

Kirona partners with EBS to launch ReACT Mobile

Electronic Business Systems has just launched ReACT Mobile in partnership with Kirona Solutions.

ReACT provides full anti-social behaviour case management and can be integrated with an organisation's existing housing management system, or be used as a stand-alone application hosted either on-premise or in the cloud.

ReACT will now have a mobile service available that encompasses full complaints incidents, and tenant histories for housing officers in the field, whether they are dedicated ASB staff or generic housing officers. The mobile application is being delivered using Kirona's Job Manager.

Steve Macartney, technical director, ReACT, said, "The demand for a mobile version of ReACT has been growing and by working with Kirona, we have developed a solution that will empower ASB practitioners with the vital information they need wherever they are."

New iPhone and Android apps from Guardian24

Guardian24 has just released an iPhone app and an updated Android app for its lone worker solutions. The iPhone App is available from Apple's App Store and the Android version is available from Guardian24's website. Both versions allow an iPhone or Android user to take advantage of the full capabilities of Guardian24 on their device.

Henry Woods, CEO, Guardian24, said, "Some users may prefer a simple mobile phone, others may want to use a smartphone while others may prefer to use none of these but instead to carry an alarm device. Guardian24 allows all of these preferences to be available, and mixed, within one overall system.

"In addition, Guardian24 also uniquely allows each end-user to have the service available to them on two devices in recognition of the growing trend to have both a work and personal device."

With the Guardian24 service, users can schedule their activities and timings. If the user 'overstays' an appointment, Guardian24 will contact them to confirm all is well. Guardian24 will escalate an 'alarm' if user welfare cannot be confirmed. Dedicated, specialist alarm monitoring staff, working on behalf of the user's organisation, can determine the nature of the user's situation through location tracking and remote audio streaming. Customisable rules control the flow of alarms and can involve the notification of the emergency response services or other relevant responders.

Social Telecoms partners with Guardian24

Through Procurement for Housing's telecommunications framework agreement, Social Telecoms is now offering Guardian24's solutions for lone worker protection. The Guardian24 service can be used via a BlackBerry, Android, Windows or iOS-enabled smartphone or specialist lone worker device.

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Trident Housing's successful digital inclusion

As part of the company's digital inclusion strategy, Trident Housing's ICT team has delivered state-of-the-art facilities which support some of the most vulnerable people living in supported and general needs accommodation across the Midlands.

Working with stakeholders including some of the residents themselves, the Trident team ensured that the computer facilities were suitable; technical requirements could not be underestimated, ranging from 3-D graphics, office software, video software, and on the hardware side, some are HP all-in-one flat screen PCs, and others are good-spec desktops with low output energy screens that also switch off automatically to save energy. Some sites have un-contested speeds of 100Mb upload and download.

Ed Reed, head of ICT, Trident Social Investment Group, said "It was instilled into our team and our broadband provider

that they needed to understand their unique role and work as a cohesive unit in order to deliver not only the hardware and software, but also the support, training, back-up, and advice to residents regarding digital inclusion and universal credit. We have since set up job clubs, silver-surfer clubs and computer training across eight sites."

The Trident digital inclusion programme has been a great success, having positively affected at least 1,300 residents, with the future possibility of reaching as many as 37,000 people via local community access.

Key contact trends in 2014 from Echo

Echo Managed Services, a provider of multi-channel contact services, has highlighted what it considers the five key customer contact challenges for public sector organisations in 2014.

While embracing the requirement for online self-service and the increased application of multi-channel, mobile and social technologies, Echo believes that 2014 will also see a re-focusing on the importance of data-driven contact processes that integrate end-to-end customer engagement, both internally across multiple systems and channels, as well as externally through the co-ordination of service delivery between relevant agencies and departments.

Phil Newland, managing director, Echo Managed Services, said, "People are still demanding high quality front-line services, and public sector customer service teams will need to work harder in 2014 to reduce complexity and

remove needless processes. However, simply mandating a wholesale switch to digital won't solve everything, and there will be a continued requirement for specialist contact partners that can smooth demand levels by providing the right levels of support regardless of the channels involved."

Echo's five key public sector contact challenges for 2014 are:

- Addressing Digital by Default, without leaving people behind: streamlining costs isn't as simple as transferring services online. For housing providers and councils in particular, the adoption of Digital by Default requires a balance between intelligent service delivery and reducing digital exclusion.
- Making social contacts cost-effective: supporting social media access to services provides a powerful mechanism for improved community access, and many public sector organisations are excited about the

potential for social media as a real time engagement channel.
- Removing barriers to transformation: many public sector bodies find that accelerating their digital strategy is often held up by the technical difficulties of integrating earlier web systems and disparate back-end databases.
- Optimising end-to-end processes: services need to be built around user needs, rather than reflecting internal structures; for example, one local council's process for parking permits required customers to go through 17 separate stages to complete the process.
- Improving the handling of personal information: failure to comply with published encryption and security policies as well as issues with access and responsible use will continue to be a concern for public sector organisations who don't enforce the correct procedures.

Viridian launches free IT training with Student@Home

Viridian Housing has started a partnership with London-based IT training company Student@Home and the charity U Can Do IT to provide free internet training to 300 Viridian residents over the age of 50 in an effort to combat social isolation. The project is reported to be costing around £80,000.

The project follows the successful completion of Viridian's award-nominated pilot Active Online, which tested different training methods to help Viridian's older residents to get online. The pilot produced some surprising results and the oldest resident who took part was 93, proving age was no barrier to learning.

Student@Home will provide one-to-one internet training in the comfort of each resident's home using a tablet computer. For those with complex needs such as visual impairments, U Can Do IT will provide specialist training and support.

All the training is free, being funded by Viridian as part of its social impact agenda to help improve the quality of life for its tenants. In addition, all residents taking part will receive post-training IT support as well as a guide to buying tablets and broadband to support each customer's long-term use of the Internet. Viridian will also be offering free mobile phone training for residents, whether they are a beginner or want to learn more.

All trainers will use an innovative app created by Student@Home. This contains a comprehensive indicator list allowing the trainer to highlight any concerns or issues the resident has straight back to Viridian in real-time, such as photographing unreported repairs or highlighting declining health or isolation.

Kelly Klein, founder and CEO, Student@Home, said, "It is a really exciting project that ties in with Student@Home's core social values. The training will have a positive impact for residents and help reduce social isolation for hundreds of residents across the UK."

Matt Campion, director of social impact, Viridian Housing, said, "Our pilot study showed that not only are our older residents keen to learn but that during the pilot, 70 per cent of the residents trained had already shared their skills with someone else, which will further help to combat social isolation and share valuable skills needed in this technology-focused world."

Castle Vale residents get free wi-fi from CommunityUK.net

Over 200 residents in Castle Vale, Birmingham to date have signed up to a new scheme to help them get online and get to grips with the internet, thanks to a pilot project led by Castle Vale Community Housing Association and CommunityUK.net and supported

by Birmingham City Council's 'Digital Birmingham' team.

Peter Richmond, chief executive, Castle Vale Community Housing Association, said, "We want Castle Vale to become Birmingham's first 'digital neighbourhood'. By tackling digital inclusion at many levels, it will create the opportunities for people to connect with each other, buy goods and services, access jobs and prepare for universal credit, as well as being a test-bed for trialling new applications and services."

DWP funds digital housing solution

DWP funding has helped to develop a new website, www.letshelpyou.co.uk, to enable tenants to move to more affordable accommodation in the private rental sector.

The LetsHelpYou service was piloted across five West Yorkshire local authorities in February 2012 and now has a network of over 20 local authorities, with more in the pipeline. Over 16,000 tenants have registered, there are over 1,700 registered landlords using the service, and so far more than 4,000 properties have been uploaded and advertised through the service.

Through local authority subscriptions, LetsHelpYou is a free service for tenants and landlords alike. Tenants use the local housing allowance calculator to work out their LHA then search for colour-coded properties within their allowance. Over 60 per cent of advertised properties have a rent equal to or below the relevant LHA rate.

LetsHelpYou specifically deals with affordable private rental properties, and as a multi-channel service, it is available online, on mobile devices and via Sky and Virgin Media.

Merlin Housing recording success with Red Box

As part of its strategy of ensuring that all tenant communications are clear, easy to understand and free of jargon, Merlin Housing Society identified voice recording as a means of monitoring operational performance and training its staff, with Red Box Recorders in partnership with NG Bailey being selected as system providers.

In March 2013, Red Box provided the solution to integrate with Merlin Housing's newly-upgraded Mitel telephony platform in its Bristol offices. Merlin Housing selected the Quality Management, Replay to Phone and AudioSearch parts of Red Box's Quantify system which enables it to automate the process of evaluating its agents for standards-based training.

Nicholas Collins, senior ICT support engineer, Merlin Housing Society, said, "We were looking at call recording as a way to improve customer service and help resolve disputes. We were very impressed by the Red Box solution, particularly its easy-to-use interface and ability to deploy on a VMware-based infrastructure."

The system also uses Red Box's Quantify PCI Suppression module which automatically suppresses specific parts of calls, such as when taking credit card details and other sensitive information, keeping the entire call as a single record without fragmentation. This enables Merlin Housing to comply with PCI-DSS requirements, regulatory authorities and any other evidential requirements for unaltered audio when taking payments for rent and repairs over the phone.

Red Box further enhanced the system with 'replay to SIP phone' capability because Merlin Housing needed the play-back to be via handsets rather than via desktop due to a combination of its thin client environment and confidentiality requirements.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Performance revolution at Raglan Housing with Qlikview

Raglan Housing is using Castle Computing's Qlikview software to consolidate its myriad data sources, removing the need to collate information from disparate systems in numerous spreadsheets and reports. The project began in June 2013 and went live in October 2013.

The QlikView solution provides dynamic and tailored information for all staff. It also allows them to drill-down into whatever data they need. Qlikview's simple dashboard offers easy analysis of information and effective 'what if' scenario planning, all based on 'a single version of the truth'.

Matt Grant, performance and quality analyst in Raglan's business improvement team, said, "The important thing is to get users to interact with the data themselves. We provide a range of helpful dashboards but the really useful insights come when individuals click through onto their analysis tab. That's where they can start the journey for themselves."

Richard Acton, business intelligence developer, Raglan Housing, said, "Castle has an impressive track record in the housing sector and the way it has integrated with us to create a single project team has really improved the quality and speed of the implementation."

Home Group gains gold from Investors in People

Home Group has achieved the Investors in People gold award by meeting 165 evidence requirements across the organisation. The gold award reflects the improvements and changes which have helped Home Group go beyond the Investors in People Standard it achieved in 2011.

IiP assessors highlighted Home Group's 'leadership pathways' programme which prepares managers for more senior roles and others to develop as future managers. Evaluation of the first set of people taking part in the programme showed that 82 per cent improved their working relationships, 88 per cent took on additional responsibilities and 58 per cent have been promoted.

IiP assessors also focused on the extent to which Home Group's core values, of caring, commercial, accountable and energised, were reflected in the way people talked about the organisation and their roles and responsibilities.

The introduction of performance-related pay was also remarked on as being important to Home Group's effective people management. Home Group worked with Unite and Unison to develop a structure which uses external data and internal performance information to develop pay rewards.

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Neighbourhub launched by Visualmetrics & Places for People

Places for People and Visualmetrics have collaborated to create Neighbourhub, a five-stage process intended to improve housing management performance, increase profitability and strengthen neighbourhood sustainability.

By defining, analysing, and measuring neighbourhood performance using interactive dashboards, the goals of Neighbourhub are to reduce property turnover, arrears, void losses and repair costs at the same time as improving tenant satisfaction and boosting profitability.

Neighbourhub's five-stage process in summary:

- **Define:** break your stock into defined neighbourhoods; these are then aligned with your existing structures and data management systems.
- **In-year dashboard monitoring and review**: neighbourhood performance is monitored against financial and management data such as turnover, arrears, void losses and repair costs.
- **Annual assessment:** this is a three-year comparison that quickly identifies trends or anomalies. Neighbourhoods are assessed against KPIs, including surplus per property, turnover, repair cost per property and future investment needs.
- **Neighbourhood planning:** this is used to identify and address the key issues facing 'Amber' neighbourhoods, so they are sustainable and viable in the long-term.
- **Option appraisal:** with a basis in facts and performance data, option appraisals often challenge conventional thinking and assumptions. It considers the options for 'Red' neighbourhoods, such as rationalisation, disposal or investment and provides a comparable financial analysis of each option.

Professor Ian Cole and Dr Stephen Green from Sheffield Hallam University said, "The Neighbourhood Planning approach links analysis, prognosis and intervention in an innovative manner and is a sector-leading initiative."

Real-time risk at Northwards Housing with Covalent

Northwards Housing has implemented a risk management system from Covalent that provides assurance on overall performance and automated alerts on deviations from expected performance. Rather than having a risk register that was always out of date, creating additional risks itself, Northwards Housing now has real-time risk reporting.

Before its implementation of Covalent Risk, Northwards Housing found risk management too time-consuming and inefficient. Managers were responsible for the delivery of services or managing projects, and this involved managing and mitigating risk, but this was rarely reflected in Northwards Housing's risk register.

Steve Finegan, head of business effectiveness and communications, Northwards Housing, said, "Managers were too busy with their jobs to worry about whether the risk register accurately reflected existing activities. In effect, the risk strategy and its accompanying register became a document filed away which was updated once or twice a year and rarely saw the light of day, and quickly became out of date as soon as it was updated."

Northwards Housing is now using Covalent Risk to link key performance data and risk information to create an integrated, up-to-date management system.

"Covalent gave us an integrated system for all our KPIs, improvement plans and risks. By far the biggest appeal was the speed at which we could implement it and we especially liked the idea of it being a web based product with no installation issues or costs to worry about.

"Covalent gives us openness and transparency, and provides a comprehensive overview of risk activity across the business. Our managers are engaging more proactively in risk management due to the dynamic way that Covalent works. And owing to the flexible and customisable nature of the system, we developed the risk matrix to suit our own strategy; the performance indicators have a tolerance consistent with the risk appetite of our board and there is a sophisticated level of admin control and audit trails."

Watford Community Housing wins IiP Gold award with Georgia Group

A high-impact leadership programme for managers at Watford Community Housing Trust has helped the organisation secure a prestigious gold accreditation from Investors in People.

Assessors for IiP praised the WCHT's culture of continuous development, particularly the leadership course created by the Georgia Group, a Cheshire-based leadership consultancy. The leadership programme has been designed to address the challenges for WCHT in delivering better customer service, becoming more competitive, sustaining growth and developing quality leaders.

Georgia Group will be sharing more information on its approach and the results achieved by WCHT at a seminar it is hosting at Wentworth on Thursday 22 May. For further information, please call 01625 441724 or email john.fay@ georgia-group.com.

GIS & MAPPING

Landmark's asset management & geocoding for Affinity Sutton

Affinity Sutton is using address verification, geocoding and visualisation services from Landmark Analytics, a division of Landmark Information Group, for the management, maintenance and improvement programmes for its portfolio of 57,000 properties.

Affinity Sutton has been able to apply 'door level mapping' to all property assets in its data warehouse and GIS platforms, providing a very accurate picture of all properties. Staff can now map repairs performance, long-term voids, tenant demographics or view issues as mapped clusters, enabling Affinity Sutton to develop enhanced improvement strategies.

Julian Pimm-Smith, head of business intelligence, Affinity Sutton, said, "We are a location-based business and the GIS visualisation of our asset and tenant information is a critical component of our business intelligence suite. The ability to visualise our information down to door-level accuracy gives our asset and housing staff a picture of their properties and patches that a spreadsheet simply can't convey.

"Our Active Asset Management performance models are incredibly complex. They cover hundreds of detailed attributes over periods of 30 years on tens of thousands of properties. The mapping of that data therefore turns huge, sprawling datasets into clear drillable graphics, from the entire country, down through regions and estates, or even down to a single property and its individual financial and qualitative performance."

Landmark launches social housing heat maps

Landmark Analytics has extended its property market data to provide social housing density analysis for urban or property studies. The 'heat maps' add an extra layer of data into the concentration of social housing, as well as information on average prices, crime rates and 'cost per sqm' data.

Drawn from various data sources, the heat maps will provide Landmark Analytics' customers with access to data from across England and Wales. This freely-available addition to the company's products gives users an overview of where social housing properties are clustered. Users can type in a postcode, and navigate their way around, viewing the distinct differences in areas, and using the colour-coded key to calculate percentage rates.

Selwyn Lim, managing director, Landmark Analytics, said: "The social housing heat maps will be of interest to a wide range of users, from social housing providers through to developers, local authorities and urban planners who are undertaking analysis of towns, boroughs or property densities in general."
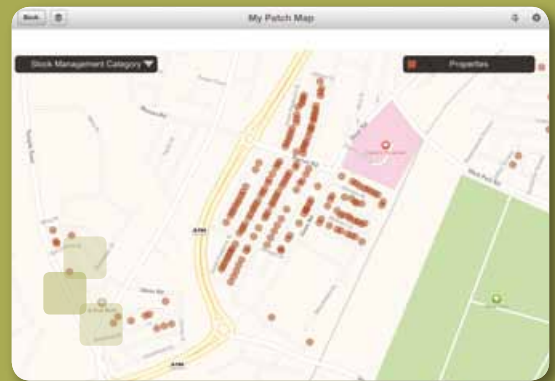
The Landmark Analytics database contains a wealth of data including 90 million property images, 20 million sale-price records, 18 million historic estate agency listings, three million floor plans, plus bedroom numbers, estimated internal areas and Council Tax banding information.

HCA's £4bn housing programme with Landmark

Landmark Information Group has been awarded a contract by the Homes and Communities Agency to provide property intelligence data to support the development of its £4bn capital investment programme for affordable housing across England.

Via Landmark Analytics (formerly Calnea Analytics), the HCA will have access to a wide range of housing market intelligence, including House Price Index data, average rental price data, bedroom counts and historic transaction information by postcode or area.

Risk management in social housing

Risk management in social housing is becoming an important issue where governance is vital, particularly following several high-profile failures and frauds reported by the Homes and Communities Agency. However, some housing providers still think of risk management as 'merely' a compliance obligation or box ticking exercise, when in fact it does have considerable power to improve business performance through better decision-making and information distribution.

> "By consolidating and presenting the key data, business intelligence dashboards significantly enhance the ability of every department within a housing provider to quickly identify and respond to potential risks."
>
> Richard Abraham, channel development manager, Intuitive Business Intelligence

Risky areas

Risk management is a wide subject, ranging from the long-term risk associated with housing providers raising finance and issuing bonds in the capital markets, through to more short-term and immediate concerns such as supplier contracts, rent arrears and data protection.

When discussing in which areas of their operations housing providers should use technology for risk management, Andrew Noone, a governance, risk and compliance (GRC) consultant for Ciber UK, said, "All business processes contain some degree of risk; the key factor is being aware of them, understanding the impact of the risks, and how to manage or mitigate the risks. With evolving technologies and compliance obligations, it's becoming more difficult to manage risk using

> "Technology can be used to follow any process, follow any pre-determined path or even change course if a particular scenario happens; the trick is to get the right piece of software for the risk that you are in fear of."
>
> Heidi Waites, managing director, Opus

traditional methods. For example, the adoption of mobile working and customer self-service can introduce a new layer of risks in addition to existing financial or data protection standards."

Adding to the theme of organisation-wide risk management, Intuitive Business Intelligence's channel development manager Richard Abraham said, "By consolidating and presenting the key data, business intelligence (BI) dashboards significantly enhance the ability of every department within a housing provider to quickly identify and respond to potential risks."

Intuitive cited the example of Bernicia Group which has implemented a BI dashboard to extract key data from its housing management and CRM databases, as well as several different spreadsheets, thereby giving Bernicia staff instant access to trending visibility and critical metrics across its housing, tenant profiling and employee statistics. This has led managers to analyse performance, improve efficiencies, enhance client service and ultimately reduce levels of risk across all of those areas.

Heidi Waites, managing director of service charge experts Opus, said, "There are a number of risks that need to be managed by our customers. These include staff turnover and the resulting loss of business knowledge,

mis-codings of actual spending leading to loss of income, multiple databases meaning that data is split over many sites, and the inability to service their needs using in-house resources and the consequent external costs."

Protecting sensitive data

Housing providers store and maintain massive volumes of sensitive data, ranging from straight-forward personal details through to information about criminal charges, convictions and anti-social behaviour.

Considering how technology should be used for risk management regarding the protection of non-financial sensitive data, PCMS' IT strategy, solutions and delivery manager Ian Walton said, "There are a number of ways in which technology can be used to minimise risk when using non-financial yet still sensitive data. The encryption of devices such as laptops, USB drives and email are all effective in managing secure data within an organisation.

"At a deeper level, the encryption of data on enterprise storage would prevent it from being used in an inappropriate manner if it was removed from the physical location somehow. Beyond this, a robust perimeter protection system around any public-facing systems that serve sensitive data is essential."

Ciber's Noone added, "Intelligence-led governance relating to non-financial data is a becoming a focus area due to the growing requirement to integrate financial and operational systems. Having up-to-date, enterprise wide data available allows better risk management policies to be

Risk management in social housing

Continued from opposite page

implemented across all areas of the business, not just areas with a financial focus."

Board-level risk

During the recent Housing Technology 2014 conference, a rough 'show of hands' during one of the presentations suggested that in most housing providers, the technology function has either a direct or very close representation on the board. Given that risk management is now completely reliant on technology, should technology-based risk management be discussed at board level?

> "Information incidents inevitably lead to financial and/or reputational losses, so it's essential that risk management is discussed at board level. To ignore this is the equivalent of burying your head in the sand and hoping for the best without preparing for the worst."
>
> Ian Walton, IT strategy, solutions and delivery manager, PCMS

PCMS' Walton said, "Risk management is a board-level activity without a doubt. For example, the criteria for ISO27001 clearly state that the board must take responsibility for the risk treatment plan and management activities around a given system; whether a business is ISO27001 compliant or not, this is still sound advice. Information incidents inevitably lead to financial and/or reputational losses, so it's essential that risk management is discussed at board level. To ignore this is the equivalent of burying your head in the sand and hoping for the best without preparing for the worst."

Intuitive's Abraham said, "While it is important to discuss and demonstrate at board level the capabilities of the technologies being implemented, it is also important to embed risk management into the organisation as a whole and therefore it must be a 'top-down' initiative implemented and supported by the board and linked to the housing provider's corporate objectives."

Overlapping risk with performance

To a certain extent, performance management and risk management are two sides of the same coin, with good performance usually correlated with reduced risk.

Abraham explained, "For example, using technology to monitor contractors' SLAs is vital not just for performance insight but also to reduce risks to maintenance contracts. Equally, the risks associated with spiralling maintenance costs can be considered alongside the performance levels of the contractors – who is performing well and offering value for money and who is not? If risk management criteria are included when setting individual KPIs and metrics for risk, then using technology to internally monitor performance should lead to a reduction in a housing provider's exposure to risk."

Ciber's Noone added, "Risk management strategies should be reflected in defined and measurable outcomes to help organisations very clearly understand "what does good look like?". Performance management software must then be able to reflect, monitor and assess the achievement of risk management KPIs to enable risk managers to measure and report their success."

Modelling & predicting risk

An important part of risk management technology is its ability to model, predict and mitigate key risk factors. Opus' Waites said, "When the key risk factors have been recognised, technology can be used easily to monitor them, report on trends and inform you of pre-determined behaviours. Technology can be used to follow any process, follow any pre-determined path or even change course if a particular scenario happens; the trick is to get the right piece of software for the risk that you are in fear of."

> "While there are no crystal balls, the best technology goes beyond 'simple' alerts to pro-actively analyse trends in data and KPIs to predict emerging risks and identify the business activities causing them."
>
> Andrew Noone, GRC consultant, Ciber UK

Last word goes to Noone who said, "Risk can be mitigated by setting thresholds above which monitored risk factors create alerts; in this way technology, acting as an early warning system, can be used to nip growing risks in the bud. While there are no crystal balls, the best technology goes beyond 'simple' alerts to pro-actively analyse trends in data and KPIs to predict emerging risks and identify the business activities causing them. Of course, this relies on the accuracy of the data being monitored and modelled; to some extent, data integrity itself becomes a risk to an organisation."

Housing Technology would like to thank Andrew Noone (Ciber UK), Richard Abraham (Intuitive Business Intelligence), Heidi Waites (Opus) and Ian Walton (PCMS) for contributing to this article.

Will the new data protection rules expose your insecurities?

Paul Wood, Assistant Director, Montal IT Consulting

A survey done by the UK Information Commissioners office in May 2013 among 506 staff who described themselves as having responsibility for Data Protection showed that not one of them could accurately describe the effect the new European legislation would have on the current Data Protection Act (1998) which as we all know currently implements an EU directive.

Plans to implement Data Protection within the European Union under a single General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) continue and although there is significant contention and debate, the overall view seems to suggest that this could be introduced as early as 2015.

The word on the street suggests that any new legislation will increase the level of red tape associated with data protection rather than reduce it, and this will only have a detrimental effect on the cost of resources required to meet it. It could therefore have significant impact on business planning.

Current DPA legislation allows data processors to take a risk-based approach, but under the new proposals this would become more stringent and organisations would need to document and monitor compliance measures at all times. Data subject consent is also expected to be tighter with explicit consent required in all cases.

Organisations will need to have data protection officers, a common occurrence in housing associations, but proposals suggest a new requirement is likely to demand that any data protection breaches are reported to the ICO within 72 hours of being aware.

In addition, data subjects (i.e. tenants, in the case of housing providers) would have the 'right to be forgotten' and could order housing providers to delete any records held by them. This might have a significant impact on any housing providers thinking about CRM, document management and HMS procurements; it's worth thinking about the implications now as the 2015 regulation is likely to make planning for data protection a mandatory part of the processing of services.

In addition, under the new proposals the regulation will introduce stricter penalty regimes with maximum fines for breaches increasing from the current £500,000 up to a million Euros or two per cent of turnover.

According to Symantec's 2013 study, the average cost of a data breach for a UK organisation rose to over £2 million last year. While this figure is unlikely to have relevance among housing providers (other than reputational damage), it's worth bearing in mind that over a third of all reported breaches were as a result of staff negligence, either through the loss of devices or failing to secure data.

Given that regulations are going to get tougher and that data breaches are increasing in a multi/omni-channel world, it's worth considering how prepared you are for such an event and being honest about what you need to do and plan for it now. Here are a few pointers to consider:

- **In an ever increasing mobile world, are all the data risks considered?** Often you will be giving access to data on mobile devices to operatives who have not previously received it in this way. Can you secure lost devices in case they fall into the wrong hands? If you don't have any mobile device management software on the device, is it worth considering it, and if you do, when was it last tested to ensure it actually does what it says?

- **Can you control other devices such as iPads and are you sure that all data is stored in corporate systems and not held on the device or other repositories?** In essence, can you secure mobility as stringently as if it was a PC in the office? For remote workers, are you sure that they access data from remote location sites via protected environments and don't simply email data to their own personal email address and then back again?

- **Are password policies enforced in line with corporate directives and can you show a clear record of this should an issue arise?** Are you confident that the central password policy is applied consistently throughout the organisation without exception? Can you point to regular training on password strength and can you show that every member of staff you employ knows this? If you have up to date policies would a survey of staff knowledge or an internal audit inspection about where to find them be an embarrassment?

- **Do you have you a layered approach to security based on risk?** In other words, do you have a Plan B if Plan A goes wrong, and can you rely on another form of defence to ensure security? For example, if devices are lost through a car theft, is there encryption in place?

- **Are you comfortable with your physical security?** If someone did break in, would they be able to steal any of your data? It's rare that break-ins occur but it only needs to be once to cause some problems.

Will the new data protection rules expose your insecurities?

Continued from the opposite page

- **Are anti-virus and malware up to date with the latest versions?** Can the organisation show that these have been implemented and are their change control records in place.
- **Are your network defences secure and are you confident that firewalls will do the job?** In a former life I remember being subjected to an audit of the data protection capabilities of my network. When the report arrived, my worst fears were confirmed as the auditor had subjected us to the same rigours applied to that of a bank. The auditor said that it was not enough to just protect the defences, you should accurately monitor the perimeters and ensure that you know whether anyone has attempted to intrude so that you can analyse and further strengthen your defences.

- **Do you have regular independent assessments, including penetration testing?** Penetration testing can appear expensive but if you consider the time and effort involved if someone does intrude into your system, it's probably worth doing. And as websites become more transactional by offering card payment options, the risk of sensitive data breaches and their impact increases and exposes organisations to PCI (DSS).
- **Finally, do you have any data lying around in any format that you don't need?** Would it be worth spending some time in either archiving it or simply destroying that which you legally can?

Perhaps as Marissa Mayer, a prominent American businesswoman once said, "With data collection, 'the sooner, the better' is always the best answer." It might be worthwhile to consider adopting this approach.

Paul Wood is assistant director of Montal IT Consulting.

Risk or no risk? – We decide

Mandy Dunstan, Head of Business Transformation, The Barnet Group

As part of Housing Technology's series of articles from The Barnet Group and their IT transformation, this issue we're looking at how the housing provider deals with risk.

It's impossible to embark on an IT transformation project of this size without factoring in risk. But how do we do this and what does it mean for our staff at The Barnet Group? As an operations manager, I am very excited about the package we have bought from Covalent to help us manage risk and to give us an overview of the organisation's performance and where we can look for improvements.

At the moment when reports need to be collated for senior managers, we have to manually pull information from Saffron, our existing housing management system, and then paste it into another spreadsheet before sending it to our performance team to make sense of it all.

There are three main benefits to us of using risk and performance management software such as Covalent:

- **Customer trends:** the performance indicators data, which we have been using since May 2013, means we can look at tenant patterns, or trends emerging and do proactive planning, rather than have reactive responses to problems.
- **We can update our records more easily:** by removing the manual element of updating tenant information, staff can be more efficient by sending automated reminders to update. This in turn enables our staff to be more proactive in their work by using self-service.
- **Group risks:** in the near future, we will definitely be able to manage risks even more effectively because we will be able to track performance and allow managers to look at potential risks ahead of their impacts and come up with solutions.

To ensure that Covalent is practical and fits in with the way we do business, we asked managers to take part in the selection of the product, the design of the system dashboards and loading all the current risks and action plans.

We have now stopped using a plethora of spreadsheets to manage risk and introduced an automated approach to risk; this way managers and staff are looking at the same correct and up-to-date information in real time. And because a large part of our operations is about reactive change and risk, Covalent empowers staff and managers alike to identify trends and proactively plan for them.

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

Keystone launches risk management tool

Keystone, well known for its asset management systems, has added a risk management product to its portfolio. Keystone Risk Management (KRM) focuses on meeting any property risk management need, but is expected to be mainly used for fire risk and legionella monitoring.

Rob Hewes, client relationship manager, Keystone, said, "We are naturally influenced by our customers' needs, and many of them asked us to produce an integrated solution to meet their risk requirements. They were all well aware that they could buy a stand-alone risk tool, but they felt that it was essential for this discipline to be closely integrated with their asset management activities."

Jan Maes, technical director, Keystone, said, "As usual, we have developed a product that is highly user-configurable so that our customers can mould it to fit their way of working. All of the risk types, risk categories, scoring algorithms, documents and processes that the product uses can be defined during implementation and enhanced and adapted afterwards to keep pace with changing demands."

Hewes added, "When a user is on site carrying out a risk assessment, it is vital that they have all of the information required at their fingertips so that they can make a well-informed assessment. KRM provides easy access to relevant information from the asset management, planned maintenance and servicing teams, while keeping track of past risk assessment visits, outcomes and actions, and ensuring that follow-up activities are monitored."

Places for People goes virtual with Open Reality to save £730,000

Places for People has reported that it has saved £730,000 in capital costs and £100,000 in annual operational costs following its introduction of Citrix thin-client infrastructure from Open Reality and its partner Bright Cloud.

Places for People's move from desktop PCs to thin clients was prompted by a doubling of its workforce to 3,000 staff following organic growth and acquisitions, as well as the need to replace its ageing IT estate. The final catalyst for the change was the housing provider's decision to reduce the number of its main offices from 35 to 21.

Jon Thomson, head of IM&T, Places for People, said, "It was imperative that we had an IT system that would support our mobile workforce. With over a quarter of a million tenants and nearly 143,000 properties to support around the country, our staff don't have the time, nor, with the advent of virtual desktops, should they have to travel to use technology.

"We worked with Open Reality and its virtual solutions arm, Brightcloud, to work out the best virtual environment for us and it was, and has since proven to be, a solution based on Citrix XenDesktop and XenApp. As a result, we have seen customer satisfaction levels increase significantly, while our operational costs have been reduced, in total saving us over £731,000."

IT mobility now means that employees of Places for People can record and access data in real-time wherever they are, with the Citrix environment giving them access to all core applications, including the Microsoft Office suite, Masterpiece for financial management and Northgate for housing management.

Citrix XenApp enables Places for People's IT team to provision extra virtual desktops and virtual applications for its end-users quickly, flexibly and securely across the organisation's 200 sites. In addition, Citrix Receiver enables employees to realise the benefits of BYOD.

The new environment comprises 3,000 seats, with 1,200 PCs replaced by 1,200 thin clients, with 70 per cent of staff accessing a virtual desktop. This natural migration resulted in an initial capital saving of around £550,000 and will deliver ongoing annual savings in future. The annual reduction in power and cooling costs will be over £120,000 and annual IT support costs have been cut by nearly £55,000 per year to just below £6,000.

Thomson said, "The initial Citrix XenDesktop pilot delivered a clear business case for us to implement a completely virtual desktop strategy. The feedback from the field also made it clear that technology was now aiding, and not hindering, their day-to-day functionality. In the two years since introducing the initial virtual IT infrastructure, customer satisfaction levels have never been higher."

MET's security seminar at Jaguar Land Rover factory

MET is running a security seminar with Assa Abloy and The Bloomfield Group at Jaguar Land Rover's factory in Birmingham on April 2. The seminar will address the complete spectrum of security from new security systems to protect facilities through to cyber security.

Ian Vickers, managing director, MET, said, "Security should be the number one priority for governments, housing providers and commercial organisations around the world and if you have any concerns regarding the security of your assets and data then this is a must attend event.

Developing an integrated security solution is of paramount importance and this event will give you invaluable intelligence."

In addition to the keynote presentations from MET, Assa Abloy and The Bloomfield Group, the event includes a two-hour tour of the Jaguar Land Rover factory to watch the cars being made.

The event is limited to 40 guests. To find out more and reserve your place, please call MET on 0121 227 0730 or visit www.met.co.uk.

Tall Group cuts cheque risk at Progress Housing

Progress Housing Group is using Tall Group's CheckPrint software to replace the continuous stationery-based cheques and normal cheques used to pay suppliers and issue refunds to tenants for over-payments.

Progress Housing issues cheques on behalf of several subsidiaries across multiple bank accounts, and often needs to match cheques with separate letters before mailing. As well as the administrative overhead, there are a number of issues associated with pre-signed cheques, including storing the cheques with account details and signature already printed, and the requirement to re-print stationery should a signatory change.

Progress Housing chose to implement the CheckPrint software so that it could print cheques for multiple companies and bank accounts using one stock of secure stationery by adding the bank account details and signatures as part of the personalisation, using magnetic ink character recognition printing.

CheckPrint worked with Sapphire, Progress Housing's finance system provider, to link the systems and configure CheckPrint to process and reconcile the payments files. In addition, CheckPrint's event log tracks user activity, recording date and time-stamped actions carried out on the system.

Questioning the value of value for money

Sir – While value for money has always been important for social landlords, recent noises from the regulator suggest the effectiveness of consistently achieving it is under scrutiny, as doubts have been raised over the actual value received from procurement contracts.

In my experience, a common problem for any organisation, public or private, is the failure to develop a robust enough benefits and impact appraisal, which allows long-term value to be quantified and measured. It's easy to speak in broad terms about the likely RoI, but too often projects are signed off without a detailed business case and an understanding of what needs to happen in order to realise the benefits. You cannot rely on procurement processes alone as the safety net for value; it can only be delivered if there is commitment from the business to enact the change and, more importantly, if third-party suppliers are committed to achieving the outcomes.

Procurement departments can have a big influence over the success of a project by providing documentation and information to suppliers that is clear, concise and relevant. If the business objectives are clear, then it is easier for suppliers to demonstrate how their solution will add value.

IT projects and services can be particularly challenging for a variety of reasons: the gulf in understanding between technologists and executives; a lack of direction from management teams; or projects driven by a desire to use technology as an agent for change. IT can only add value if it is properly aligned to the business objectives and the IT department adopts a service-based culture, rather than trying to impose control.

Depressingly, many organisations still view IT as a cost centre, a necessary evil, rather than pursuing a strategy where it can add tangible value to the organisation's business strategy. Customer service and low TCO should be at the heart of the IT function, where money is spent wisely on the infrastructure layer, leaving more of the budget for strategic value-adding projects at the systems and communications layers. To summarise, value for money is not one dimensional and shouldn't be viewed as only cost and supplier capability; it's a multi-dimensional benefits, impact and RoI exercise that requires business engagement and professional management of change.

Alistair MacLeod
Director, Waterstons

Risky business

Sir – Protecting vast amounts of financial and personal data, integrating disparate sites, facilitating remote access and managing employees' use of applications are all serious concerns for a housing provider.

Addressing these concerns while reducing cost and improving operational efficiency are part and parcel of a CIO's job, but reducing risk as well? It's no mean feat, especially with operations and systems access spread across many sites and device types.

Housing IT leaders are constantly having to balance risks vs. benefits; the benefits of flexible access to systems vs. the risks to the organisation's data and networks. Data protection must be at the heart of the decision-making process; in recent years, there have been many high profile data privacy breaches as systems are hacked, laptops left unlocked and tablets left in the back of taxis.

Housing providers need to make sure technology is part of the risk management strategy, and doesn't become the risk itself.

Neil Clark
Managing Director, Business Markets Direct, Easynet

Appetite for risk

Sir – Housing regulation is now clearly focused on risk, assurance and governance. The crucial juggling act is for organisations to remain financially viable while taking on more risk. Rigorous risk management processes are a key tool in any registered providers' armoury. We have just completed a survey on risk and assurance with a range of housing providers to find out whether these processes and frameworks have developed in line with changes in external factors or whether risk and assurance frameworks have stagnated and may not be fit for purpose.

The HCA has provided housing boards with its 'starter for 10' by annually producing its 'sector risk profile' document. The HCA will even review risk and assurance systems as part of its regulatory judgement, but there has not been any attempt to review and compare the risk and assurance frameworks in operation across the sector.

The results of our survey suggest in many organisations risk and assurance frameworks have remained unaltered for a number of years despite the rapidly changing external environment. There is some excellent practice within the sector but many smaller providers are operating with cumbersome reporting mechanisms and their methodologies have not developed to take account of current best practice.

With the proposed downgrading of providers over failings concerning value for money, poor risk and assurance frameworks may be the next area of concern for the regulator. More robust systems and better analysis can provide greater comfort and assurance to housing providers which in turn will allow them to take on more risk in a planned manner. As the sector continues to develop, it may well be this ability to take on more risk that could become the defining feature of those providers that grow and develop.

Bill Gill, BG Audit & Consultancy
Mark Hobart, Managing Director, Clearview Systems

The BG Audit and Clearview Systems report is available from www.clearviewbusiness.com

More choice, more decisions

Sir – The ICT market in housing shows no sign of slowing as business transformation programmes fuel the procurement of new software, driven not only by service delivery objectives but also by the need to help the business deliver ever-increasing levels of efficiency and effectiveness.

New software suppliers are entering the market, resulting in more choice and the ability to manage processes differently. In particular, we have seen an increase in requests for consultancy support for ERP, CRM and EDM procurements. For example, we are working with Magna Housing Group for an implementation review and Genesis Housing Association to provide project governance support for system implementation projects.

While housing providers need to invest in ICT in order to put tenants and communities at the heart of their business, they want to ensure it delivers not just a quick fix but also supports long-term goals. Organisations are continuing to ask for more from technology while tightly managing spend. When considering suitable solutions, typical questions are being asked regarding suitability and affordability:

1. Do we need this type of system? If so, does it need to be one developed for the sector or is there a generic solution which we can adapt cost-effectively to specifically suit our organisation?
2. Should we look at a solution that sits at the front end to manage and feed into our core line-of-business systems?

It's great to see innovative and technologically-advanced software coming to the housing sector; IT needs to evolve continuously so that it fully supports housing organisations as they transform and reshape their business offerings.

Jacqui Stoggall
Director of Consultancy, Sovereign Business Information Group

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

Housing Technology 2014 review

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2014 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

Housing Technology 2014 took place at the end of February for the second consecutive year the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry. After the pre-event drinks reception on Tuesday 25 February, the conference opened the following day with a fascinating keynote presentation from George Clarke, Channel 4's presenter of 'Restoration Man'.

After a full day of presentations and networking, the majority of guests, speakers and sponsors then stayed together in the evening for an informal supper, featuring the Oxford Belfry's 'Round the World' buffet. The second day of the conference began with an incredible presentation from Falkland veteran Simon Weston, OBE which left the audience open-mouthed and speechless.

Housing Technology would like to sincerely thank all the guests, speakers, sponsors and exhibitors for making the event such a valuable forum for exchanging ideas, gaining business intelligence and making new connections. There is also an independent review of the event on page 32.
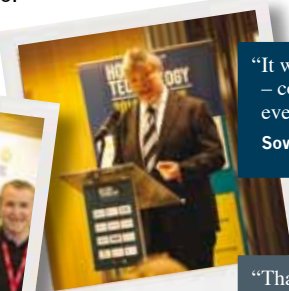
Details about the Housing Technology 2015 conference will be published as soon as we have confirmed the date and the venue.

"Another great event – well done!"
WM Housing

"It was a very positive couple of days – congratulations on a very successful event."
**Sovereign Business Integration Group**

"Thank you so much for organising an excellent event – I certainly managed to make some excellent new contacts. All of the team, including the hotel staff, were brilliant."
BT

"Thank you very much for the huge effort in organising it and getting the two fantastic keynote speakers, especially Simon Weston; that was truly breath-taking!"
Leeds Federated Housing Association

"Thank you for organising Housing Technology 2014 – our team commented on how important and successful the event was."
Ciber UK
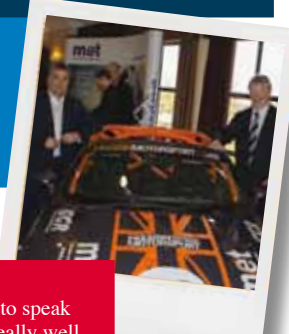
"Congratulations on a highly successful event; all the feedback from my team was extremely positive."
Capita

"Thank you for the opportunity to speak at the conference, which was really well organised and well attended."
Peaks & Plains Housing Trust

"Well done on the delivery of a great conference!"
Home Group

"We both enjoyed the conference and will certainly be back for more next year."
Nottingham Community Housing

"I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the Housing Technology 2014 conference. The event was really informative, with lots of helpful and knowledgeable people to network and share experiences with."
Suffolk Housing Society

"A big thank you for all your efforts and commitment to this year's conference."
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Learning to fly at Housing Technology 2014

Tony Smith, Independent Housing IT Consultant, Acutance Consulting

This is a slightly abridged version of a posting written by Tony Smith, an independent housing IT consultant at Acutance Consulting, on his 'Tony Smith: That Housing IT Guy' blog (details below) following last month's Housing Technology 2014 conference.

It didn't have a runway, but the Q Hotels' Belfry hotel just outside Oxford was the ideal place to learn to fly. If you are involved with social housing that is. I was pleased to get down to the fifth Housing Technology conference at the end of February, put together by George Grant and Alastair Tweedie from this magazine.

As usual, the venue was a great choice (if a little bit of a labyrinth). Even my housing friends and customers from the South East found getting there an easier job than getting into central London. Maybe the NHF should (at last) take note and consider locating out of the capital and Olympia, for its annual November IT Manager events. All credit to Housing Technology, keep up the good work! They even fed the suppliers, something that does not always happen in the autumn in West London.

Many thanks too, to everyone who stopped me for a chat; it was great to hear how projects are going and some of the frustrations out there. Integration (or lack of it), the inflexibility of applications or suppliers, the limitations of project teams and staff, procurement hassles and some shrinking IT budgets, were the most common issues that housing IT people chatted with me about. As usual, feel free to contact me (details below) to bounce any idea off me.

It was good to see such a variety of presentations, although welfare reform was a recurrent theme. George Clarke, C4's 'Restoration Man', was an inspired choice for opener. We certainly need more positive and refreshing voices like his. It also brought back some of my caravan nightmares from my youth. I still haven't been back to Lowestoft to this day (honest!). So much to mention, I will try to focus on what I found most interesting and innovative.

Richard Scholes of The Hyde Group had some interesting points to make; one about the outcome of his competitive dialogue for a comms project struck a chord with me. Just getting down to a single supplier can have its benefits. Hyde managed to shave nearly a third from its previous costs. Maybe time spent on CD can always deliver some kind of payback. His internal staff assessment using a panel was also a clear and fair way of improving the quality of his ICT team. I was nodding and smiling too with his approach of embedding his ICT staff with users and business teams. The perfect way for everyone to interact and understand everyone's pressures.

Jonathan Creaser of RHP gave a great overview with Tracey Elliott of their progress in supporting multi-channel 'nudging'. Everywhere I go to do consultancy these days, they want to channel shift as well. RHP seem to really be on top of the game here, even being brave enough to persuade the 'silver surfers' to get online. Full marks to Tracey for answering my questions regarding that truthfully; digital exclusion is not something to be glossed over and, moreover, is an area we need to help and nudge our communities.

One of the most interesting sessions came from Accent Group and The Housing Contact Company on 'How & why is customer satisfaction important in 2014'. In that presentation John Doyle of Housing Contact drew on his experience of gathering customer feedback across a number of industries to question the relevance of speaking to your customers in 2014. Through his unlikely comparison of social housing and the UK automotive retail market, he made the point that measuring customer satisfaction, whatever your sector, has probably never been as important a process for organisational improvement.

He noted that although most organisations understand how they go about measuring satisfaction, very few of them really understand why they do it. It had echoes of John Seddon and his 'Vanguard' method; understand how to measure the outcome, don't just blindly play to the KPIs in use.

John's philosophy is to try and speak to everyone to whom you have delivered a service as soon as possible after the event and then to use your dissatisfied customers to tell you what is wrong with your operations. This fairly radical approach was given weight by the testimonial provided by Andrew Kidds of the Accent Group, who has used the service for over two years and seen real satisfaction levels improve – i.e. based on around 33 per cent of customer responses taken on the same day or day after as opposed to less than 10 per cent response rates taken weeks later.

At the same time, the level of complaints have dropped significantly and last year alone Accent were able to identify and resolve dissatisfaction issues with over 1,500 of their tenants. This all ploughs back into an improved customer journey and overall lower numbers of wasted and avoidable calls.

The examples I have selected from just a few of the presentations show the quality of what we had here. Take some of these lessons and stories, learn to make your organisation fly. Fewer suppliers banging on about how brilliant their solutions are and more practical experiences from RSLs. Let's have more of these, Housing Technology – keep them coming!

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

Blog: tonysmiththathousingitguy. blogspot.co.uk

Front-line housing staff under pressure from welfare reform

Welfare reform, lack of housing supply and the increasing gap between income and housing costs are having the biggest impact on front-line housing roles according to new research.

The UK-wide research across over 1,000 tenants and housing professionals, commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Housing and Wheatley Group, found that front-line workers want their employers to provide education and training, but also wellbeing support to help them cope with fear, distress and suicide threats from tenants under increasing pressure.

Dr Jo Richardson from De Montfort University's Centre for Comparative Housing Research, which carried out the study, said, "Housing professionals are often the one constant in some tenants' lives. Where other public services respond in a crisis, housing is already there and can observe and act quickly when intervention is needed."

The research found that mobile technology is increasingly freeing housing workers from the office, allowing them to spend more time on their 'patch' and in customers' homes. Furthermore, the tenants who responded to the survey said they would like to see even more of their housing officers, with some keen for tenants to play a stronger role, using their knowledge of their own neighbourhoods to work alongside housing professionals.

Judy Waugh, director of membership, Chartered Institute of Housing, said, "This is business for a purpose; this research shows that housing professionals believe maximising income is vital if they are to continue to deliver services and invest in new and existing homes.

"This research shows that front-line housing professionals are providing hugely valuable services, and also demonstrates the pressure they are under from welfare reform and the housing crisis, so it's vital that employers invest in training, education and support for their staff."

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New head of IT for Magna

David Connoley, Group Head of IT, Magna Housing Group

Magna Housing Group has appointed David Connoley as their new group head of IT. His previous experience includes working at The Barnet Group, Viridian Housing and Moat Housing, as well as companies such as Marks & Spencer, Barclays and Virgin Atlantic.

Mobile working at Magna is expected to be one of the first areas to be addressed by Connoley and his team, with the aim of taking services to tenants rather than the other way around, including upgrading a number IT applications to the latest versions this year.

David Conneley, group head of IT, Magna Housing Group, said, "My role is all about understanding the requirements of the organisation and putting them into a package of things that the team will deliver.

"I spent twenty years as a self-employed consultant specialising in interim IT management. You get very good at going in to an organisation at short notice and fixing things. But that work took me all over the country and I now want to put down some roots."

Circle celebrates its apprentices on film

Circle Housing has launched five short films to celebrate the benefits of apprenticeship schemes in the housing sector. Each film (online at www.circleopportunities.org.uk) follows an apprentice from Circle Housing as they complete a day's work at the organisation.

Samantha Caunt was one of the apprentices to take part after swapping places with Circle Housing's chief executive Mark Rogers and starring in an online film. She said, "I thought the job swap with Mark Rogers was great. It really helped me to see what it involves to be a CEO and helped me to understand how the different parts of the organisation come together.

"We talked about the difference apprenticeships make to people who might otherwise find it difficult to get the right opportunities and prove themselves. It has been really good to take part in the filming and show the benefits of working as an apprentice in the housing sector."

As well as the in-house roles provided by Circle Housing, each of its contractors is committed to providing one apprenticeship opportunity within their business for every £0.5m that Circle Housing spends with them.

Last year, Circle Housing was awarded a 'Big Tick' accreditation from the charity Business in the Community for its employment and skills programme which helps more than 9,000 people into working and training opportunities every year.

Mark Rogers, chief executive, Circle Housing, said, "The housing sector is a great place for apprentices to learn and develop for the future. For example, our programme employs apprentices in teams within construction, administration, communications and customer services. Importantly, nearly two-thirds of apprentices at Circle Housing will go on to permanent roles in the organisation."

Now SDS is 20

Phil Shelton, Chief Executive, SDS

SDS, a leading software provider in social housing, is celebrating 20 years in business. The Surrey-based company provides real-time software to help housing providers with development appraisals, project workflows, and cash flow management.

The company was started by David Shelton in 1994 and now has 14 employees and an annual turnover of around £1 million. For the past five years, David's son Phil has been chief executive. He said, "It's been a fantastic experience and we're looking forward to the next 20 years, innovating and creating cutting-edge software for our customers.

"When my father set up SDS 20 years ago, his vision was to innovate and help people understand development. We are continuing that ethos today and breaking new ground with effective, user-friendly solutions. We're always aiming to refine and improve the technology to help the housing sector."

Kate Varney, development and new business officer, Longhurst Group, said, "SDS and Sequel have dramatically improved the time it takes to update our cash flows, and its training and support are always brilliant."

Mears' apprentices – You're hired!

Continuing Housing Technology's support for apprenticeship schemes in the housing sector, we are delighted to report that Mears Group has just taken on 11 new apprentices from Gateshead College. The new intake brings the total number of apprentices working for Mears in Gateshead to more than 30.

Five of the new apprentices · Michael Rodgers, Connor Singh, Adam Henderson, Aaron Dalton and Thomas Humby · are helping Mears to service a multi·million pound property maintenance contract with Gateshead Council. The three·year contract, which started in April 2012, will see Mears carry out more than 50,000 repairs per year on homes managed by The Gateshead Housing Company.

The remaining six apprentices · Declan Laidler, Christian Ridge, Aidan Elstob, Jack McRobbie, Jack Howorth and John Ellison · are helping Mears to service a separate maintenance contract on behalf of Home Group.

John Norton, North East regional director, Mears Group, said, "Apprenticeships are vital for us to secure a viable future for this business. With older skilled workers retiring and the need for a multi·skilled approach, it's really important to bring in a regular influx of talent who can take the company forward and meet our client needs.

"Due to our strong relationship with Gateshead College, which stretches back several years, we have been able to take on many local students who are already adding genuine value to our business."

Mick Brophy, managing director of business innovation and development, Gateshead College, said, "Some employers may be wary of taking on young apprentices of 16 or 17 because they might feel it would take too much time to train them to the required standard. However, Mears is a great example of how young, raw talent can hit the ground running, add genuine value to an organisation and help to protect its future."

Aareon QL Housing chosen by Six Town and Tamar

Six Town Housing and Tamar Housing Society have chosen Aareon's QL Housing as their new housing management systems.

Tamar Housing Society and Aster Communities have joined forces under a strategic partnership to provide more choice and better value to their tenants in Devon and Cornwall, with Aster Communities and Aster Homes staff relocating to Tamar Housing's office in Plymouth.

Having seen QL Housing working well at other organisations within the Aster Group, it was a fairly straightforward choice for Tamar Housing to adopt the same software. The implementation of QL Housing will begin in March 2014.

Six Town Housing's implementation of QL Housing began in February 2014, following a tender process in July 2013.

National Housing Federation on board with eShare

The National Housing Federation is using eShare's BoardPacks board portal and governance software for its board meetings in order to reduce the time and cost of printing board papers, having originally discovered eShare at its own Company Secretaries Conference. The Federation is using the BoardPacks app and meeting management module.

Stephen Bull, head of governance and company secretary, National Housing Federation, said, "As the trade body for housing, we want to be seen to be embracing the latest technology and leading the way for other boards. We want to set an example that all housing associations' boards can follow.

"BoardPacks is saving us a lot of admin and printing time, as well as the cost of postage, plus our board members now have easy access to historical board papers during meetings."

Using the software has streamlined the Federation's meeting management process, and switching to iPads has enabled board members to have all the governance information they need at their fingertips. The Federation has since rolled out BoardPacks to its leadership team and audit and risk committee.