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Grampian Housing goes virtual with Castle Computer Services
Page 27



Keystone's component accounting with Midland Heart
Page 04



EDM at Port of Leith with Invu
Page 30



Enterprise search & BI from Clearview for Villages Housing
Page 30



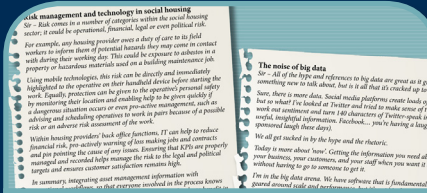
Feature article: SMAC your IT up
Page 18



Optevia wins Dynamics CRM deal at A2Dominion
Page 15



Trident deploys CGFirst Board Portal on iPads
Page 22



Readers' letters - risk management and big data in housing
Page 28



Peaks & Plains' approach to arrears
Page 06



Kypera delivers full suite to Atrium Homes
Page 03



1st Touch launches self-service app
Page 10



Wales & West's free wi-fi with Meraki & BT
Page 20

Editor's Notes

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Building homes with technology

The pressure on social housing stock is relentless, with most housing providers doing what they can to build new properties and make best use of their existing properties to maximise the number of residents they can accommodate, with particular pressure on those operating in the main cities.

While technology on its own can't magically create hundreds of new properties, it can be used to help alleviate the problem in different ways. The most obvious way is by using technology to enable housing providers to work more efficiently, such as perhaps replacing expensive paper-based activities with cheaper and more streamlined electronic processes or using mobile working to lower costs and increase productivity, and thereby reduce their operating costs, with some of the savings put towards building programmes.

Another area is housing providers' financial management. Despite the difficulties of introducing component accounting to meet the recent SORP regulations, the resulting asset registers should make it easier for housing providers to accurately measure and predict the present and future values of their portfolios. Combined with tighter risk management to run as 'lean' organisations, housing providers may then find it easier to raise capital for additional housing stock.

Mutual exchanges have increased in popularity since the introduction of the 'bedroom tax', with HomeSwapper reporting a 25 per cent increase in the number of tenants swapping homes in the past 12 months. However, many tenants are likely to be unaware of mutual exchanges; by promoting such services to their tenants, housing providers may find that they

can increase the number of residents that they can support through having fewer unused bedrooms among their properties.

Many housing providers are well-positioned to turn their existing in-house services into commercial propositions that they can sell to other housing providers and local authorities, such as Gentoo's StreetWise service for ASB management and North Lincolnshire Homes' Diamond Net broadband service, in order to create additional revenue streams.

Finally, the latest housing development and project management software can make the actual viability appraisals and building processes faster, more efficient and therefore cheaper.

Exclusive video interviews

We have just published three excellent videos on www.housing-technology.com/ videos, comprising exclusive interviews with the Falklands veteran Simon Weston, OBE and George Clarke, presenter of Channel 4's 'Restoration Man', along with interviews conducted during the Housing Technology 2014 conference in February.

Vital research tool

If you weren't already aware, every news story, feature article, comment and interview from the very first issue of Housing Technology is online, indexed by topic, housing provider, IT supplier, date and content type. At the click of a mouse, you can now research new technologies you are considering adopting, review all stories about prospective IT suppliers, and read about the technology infrastructures of prospective customers. Find out more at www.housing-technology.com.

FUTURE EVENTS

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

**Arena Partnership: National Roadshow &
User Groups**
May onwards, various UK locations
www.arenapartnership.co.uk

1st Touch: Regional Conference 2014
12 June, The Palace Hotel, Manchester
www.1sttouch.com

Housing Technology: Beer & Pizza 2014
18 November, Olympia, London
www.housing-technology.com
By invitation only



SECTIONS

HOUSING MANAGEMENT	PAGE 03
FINANCE MANAGEMENT	PAGE 04
MOBILE WORKING	PAGE 10
CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT	PAGE 13
FEATURE ARTICLE: SMAC	PAGE 18
DIGITAL INCLUSION	PAGE 20
INFRASTRUCTURE	PAGE 23
READERS' LETTERS	PAGE 28
GENERAL NEWS	PAGE 30

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Kypera delivers full suite to Atrium Homes



Atrium Homes has just completed the deployment of a suite of new products from Kypera following a three-month implementation period. The housing provider is now using Kypera Housing, Kypera Financials and Kypera Mobile within an integrated infrastructure.

Stephen Black, chief executive, Atrium Homes, said, "As part of the procurement exercise, we ran an initial presentation which was designed for the suppliers to show us what their systems could do. This proved very useful in informing Atrium staff not just which systems might work for us, but also which people we could work with."

"Kypera's value-for-money approach supports our key objectives, particularly our goals of protecting our long-term financial viability, maximising income and using resources efficiently. Kypera's offering is economical, will help us to be more efficient, and the introduction of mobile working will enhance our effectiveness in delivering our services to Atrium's tenants."

Newport City Homes to implement Kypera



Due to go live in June 2014, Newport City Homes is in the middle of implementing a new housing management system from Kypera alongside its Microsoft Dynamics CRM system.

NCH's implementation of Kypera Housing is part of a large transformation programme around customer service. The programme also includes the deployments of Microsoft Dynamics CRM with a data warehouse to deliver many of the housing IT system functions both inside and outside the contact centre.

Owen Barrett, IS

manager, Newport City Homes, said, "The big issue I've always had is the datasets we keep are numerous, complex and costly. We need to rationalise and CRM is the perfect way to do this."

Having completed the Dynamics CRM implementation, NCH wanted a modern rents and service charges system based on the latest technology that aligned with its existing Microsoft platforms and CRM and provided back-office support for its finance, income recovery and home ownership teams.

NCH reported that it chose Kypera Housing due to its Microsoft compatibility, ease of use and value for money.

New chief operating officer

Kypera has appointed Philippa Scobie as its new chief operating officer, with the position having been created following a management restructure due to the company's recent growth and the success of its latest software built on Microsoft's .NET platform.

Scobie will be responsible for all day-to-day operational matters and for managing the future growth of the business. She is a qualified accountant and joins Kypera with more than 11 years' experience as a financial controller, including stints at Lehman Brothers and Bedfordshire NHS Trust.

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

- A2Dominion 15
- Adactus Housing 10
- Aspire Group 34
- Atrium Homes 03
- Broadacres Housing 11
- Carnegie Trust 23
- Coast & Country 25
- Denbighshire Council 04
- Gentoo Group 13

- Grampian Housing 27
- Hillcrest Housing 11
- Housing 21 32
- Midland Heart 04
- Newport City Homes 03
- Peaks & Plains Housing Trust 06
- Places for People 09
- Port of Leith Housing 30
- Radian Group 32

- Salix Homes 16
- Severnside Housing 24
- Shropshire Housing 24
- Solihull Community Housing 16
- Trident 22
- Villages Housing 30
- Wales & West Housing 20
- WM Housing 23

As well as providing the software, Capita also delivered the technical elements of the project and managed the process of user acceptance and user trust.

Rob Hewes, client relationship director, Keystone Asset Management, said, "The project with Midland Heart has really demonstrated the power of true partnership working. Through the combined efforts of the technical and financial experts within our respective teams, we have produced something that is unique, to the clear business benefit of both Midland Heart and Keystone."



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Peaks & Plains' new approach to arrears management

Simon Penaluna, Assistant IT Director, Peaks & Plains Housing Trust

Simon Penaluna, assistant IT director at Peaks & Plains Housing Trust, explains how the housing provider has brought about a revolution in arrears management. Its in-house developed system, which won 'Most Innovative IT System' earlier this year at the Housing Innovation Awards, incorporates original thinking, improved performance and value for money. The fact that its collection rates have risen and its arrears have fallen, when most housing providers are facing rapidly increasing debt, speaks for itself.

Good arrears management and maximising rental income collection have always been high priorities for Peaks & Plains, but in 2012 the likely impact of Welfare Reform and in particular the introduction of the 'bedroom tax', moved them to the top of our agenda. The reforms meant that many of our tenants would lose some of their housing benefit, potentially leading to a significant rise in rent arrears.

Home-grown technology

There was a very good business case for developing a system that would result in better income collection and our ICT team rose to the challenge. Initially, they looked at off the-shelf technology but soon felt that 'home-grown' software would offer a much better, value for money solution.

The team's information support officer took the lead in designing bespoke software and our Arrears Management Tool (AMT) was developed. The new technology, which was introduced in October 2012, uses complex algorithms and key triggers, such as changes to housing benefit, to identify tenants needing support and to prioritise debt.

No longer fit for purpose

Originally, when it came to the reasons for tenants falling into arrears and defining the level of support that they needed, conclusions were drawn

and decisions were made based predominantly on staff knowledge. This had worked well enough over the years, but with the advent of Welfare Reform, this way of working was simply not suitable. A new approach was needed if arrears were not to rise significantly and collection rates to fall.



Great teamwork

Great teamwork was a vital ingredient in developing our new approach to arrears. Our ICT team worked very closely and successfully with our income and service improvement teams, developing a good understanding of the intricacies of arrears management. At the same time, our income and service improvement teams gained a good grasp of how the new technology worked.

New way of working

With the AMT, our ICT team came up with an innovative system that can capture, replicate and display arrears management intelligence. Through this new way of working, workloads can be easily shared and staff can readily support one another, focusing on priority tenants such as those receiving reduced housing benefit due to the 'bedroom tax'. Our staff now have a much better knowledge and understanding of the tenants they are working with as well as considerably more time to give them the help they need.

Arrears management revolution

From the very beginning, we felt that our new approach to arrears would play an important part in helping minimise the negative impact of

Welfare Reform and the 'bedroom tax' on both us and our customers. In reality, the effectiveness of the AMT has exceeded everyone's expectations, leading to a revolution in arrears management. The introduction of the AMT has meant more efficient use of staff resources and has led to a reduction in the volume of cases being managed manually by our income team, who can now focus on cases identified as needing action.

Since the system went live in October 2012, income team members deal with, on average, only a third of the tenants that previously made up their caseloads. As a result, the number of home visits has doubled and the number of telephone calls to tenants needing help has trebled.



Increased rent collection rates

The freeing up of staff time has meant that our income team can now focus more on collecting 'live' arrears, leading to improved collection rates and a reduction in the loss of rental income. As a measure of how successful this is proving to be, rent collection rates from October 2011 to September 2012 have been compared with collection rates from October 2012 (when the AMT was introduced) to September 2013. Having adjusted the figures to take into account our 6.8 per cent April 2013 rent increase, this translates into an average of 1.14 per cent extra rent collected, equating to approximately an extra £23,000, every month, over the 12 month period.

Bucking the trend

The value of our home-grown AMT

Peaks & Plains' new approach to arrears management

Continued from the opposite page

technology cannot be overstated. The fact that our rent arrears have fallen, at a time when most social housing providers are facing rapidly increasing debt, speaks for itself. Within three months of the AMT going live, our rent arrears fell from 1.7 per cent to an all-time low of 1.5 per cent, putting Peaks & Plains in the upper quartile for arrears management and establishing us as a 'top five' performer. Our figures are undoubtedly bucking the trend, as evidenced by survey results released by Inside Housing, CIH and Capita. The results show that rent arrears across the country have already increased dramatically as a result of the 'bedroom tax' and Welfare Reform.

One in 10 of the 459 housing providers surveyed said that their organisations had seen arrears increase by more than 20 per cent, while a further 41 per cent reported a rise in arrears of more than 5 per cent.

Value for money

We have no doubt that our AMT technology represents really great

value for money. There was no financial outlay involved as we decided not to buy-in software but to go down the route of developing our AMT in-house. The development of the software was resourced internally, with no additional funding input. Over a six month period, our ICT team's information support officer spent three months working on the project while, at the same time, developing our iPhone app.

As the AMT was developed in-house, we are realising annual savings in the region of £30,000 by not having to buy-in or upgrade our arrears management software. Furthermore, as our AMT is home-grown, it is very easy to make continuous improvements to the system with few cost implications.

Potential to generate income

Great interest has been shown in our AMT by other housing providers and our ICT team have taken on the role of 'salesmen', demonstrating and selling the merits and benefits of the new technology. A number of housing

providers, as well as the North West Income Best Practice Group, have visited our head office in Macclesfield to see the new technology in action. There is therefore great potential for the AMT to generate income for Peaks & Plains.

A success story

For Peaks & Plains, AMT has been a huge success story. Our ICT team have won 'IT Team of the Year' in the Housing Hero awards, have proven themselves a vital part of the success of the Trust, and continue to develop innovative in-house solutions to practical problems.

Finally, and most importantly, AMT has benefitted the people who matter the most, Peaks & Plains' tenants. The new approach to income collection means we can provide them with the help and support they need in these challenging times.

Simon Penaluna is the assistant IT director at Peaks & Plains Housing Trust.

In4Systems' success with Promaster and Schedulmaster products

In4Systems, now part of Orchard, has announced that Golden Gates Housing Trust is now using its new Schedulmaster software, and Longhurst Group and WM Housing Group have both upgraded to the latest version (v4) of its web-based Promaster software for asset management.

Gavin Black, senior project manager for business improvement, Longhurst Group, said, "As the number of homes we provide grows, so does the demand from staff for a more flexible approach to mobile working and greater module integration. We're always looking for ways to improve efficiencies surrounding asset management and moving to Promaster 4 will let us

deliver a better service while reducing the total cost of ownership."

Neil Warne, stock condition systems manager, WM Housing Group, added, "We recognised that Promaster 4 was the natural progression of what was an already robust and comprehensive asset management package."

The new Schedulmaster module is a web-based appointment system designed to efficiently allocate jobs to remote workers based on their location, current workloads and skill set. With integration to other Promaster modules such as Reactive Maintenance Helpdesk and interfaces to DLO and housing management systems, information

can be used from all sources, allowing workers to be managed as efficiently as possible.

Donna Wilkinson, head of customer services, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said, "Working with In4Systems has allowed us to introduce a dynamic appointment scheduling system for our responsive repairs service that suited the specific needs of our business and also helped to reduce costs. Since the initial development and implementation, we are now expanding the appointment scheduler to allocate work in other non-repairs areas of the business, including the estate caretakers working within our neighbourhood teams."

New housing fraud legislation – Needed or ineffective posturing?

New legislative powers have been recently introduced that will give local councils the power to make banks, building societies, utility and telecommunications companies supply them with data in order to investigate housing fraud, writes Emma Moore, a freelance writer and journalist.

The Prevention of Social Housing Fraud Act aims to tighten the housing system and includes initiatives such as introducing new criminal offences of sub-letting, with a maximum of two years' imprisonment and an unlimited fine, powers for the courts to give housing providers any profit the tenant has made from sub-letting and the aforementioned rights for councils to delve into suspects' financial pasts in pursuit of evidence.

This may come as welcome news to housing providers struggling with hard-to-prove cases of sub-letting in properties desperately needed by others, but there are some who see the Act as essentially ineffective and worryingly unclear.

Ongoing housing reform

This tightening of regulations and giving more powers to eviction authorities is part of a decade-long campaign to change the social housing system. One notable government initiative was the 'Right to Acquire' scheme which, according to the government, "allows most housing association tenants to buy their home at a discount".

The Money.co.uk website points out that "over 1.5 million people have bought their home under the 'right to buy' scheme in the UK", and the initiative has certainly lifted some families out of reliance on housing providers. However, it has also reduced the amount of available housing as council-owned homes are bought by their tenants. This arguably puts greater pressure on housing providers and has limited the options for those in need of social housing.

The situation is greatly worsened when housing which could be let to those in need is instead sub-let by 'tenants' who claim to be living there but are in fact living elsewhere and renting out the property for their own profit. This results in an even greater lack of housing, which may force some desperate people onto the streets. However, there are those who would argue that the latest measures to give housing associations greater legal powers over their tenants demonizes and impinges upon the rights of those in social housing. Others believe that this is a move which will give beleaguered housing associations the powers they need to improve their services as a whole.

Unanswered questions

The Guardian newspaper has brought up several issues with the new Act which have not as yet been adequately answered by the government. Notably, only local authorities can begin legal proceedings, which raises the question of whether councils will prosecute on behalf of housing providers in order to raise money? This would introduce an undesirable element of profiting from the crimes of the dispossessed into government housing policy.

Concerns may also be raised over the appropriateness of examining personal data in pursuance of evidence. Many utility companies have privacy policies which require customers to agree to a degree of data sharing anyway, so this may not be as much of an issue as people may think. The British Gas privacy policy, for example, states that "from time to time...we may pass your information to countries that do not have the same standards of protection for personal information as the UK", but a perceived violation of personal data is likely to raise hackles nonetheless.

Furthermore, the status of sub-letters in such cases also appears to be unclear. Those who are aware of their illegal sub-letter status could be

considered to be aiding a crime, but often people in such situations are unaware of the true state of affairs.

Potential usefulness?

The Guardian sees the new legislation as mere legislative posturing, reporting that "this amounts to little more than legislation for its own sake", likening the situation to a shark which must keep moving in order to stay alive. Just as the shark must keep moving, so the government must keep bringing in new legislation or be seen as stagnant. That anything of significance will be achieved, The Guardian said, is unlikely. Nonetheless, the Act is already being utilised.

For example, a woman was recently found guilty of illegally sub-letting her housing association property to a family in East Ham, London, while she lived in Barking and Dagenham and was ordered by the court to pay back her £6,900 profit from sub-letting the property, plus £700 costs. Newham Council, which pursued the case, also had a 'key amnesty' before the introduction of the legislation, allowing people sub-letting council properties to return the keys of the properties to the association without fear of reprisal. The council reported that this amnesty saved £1.4 million and saw the return of 26 homes.

A drop in the ocean

However, the fact remains that there is a desperate need for the kind of low-cost, low-rent housing which those who illegally sub-let council properties are providing. Ellis and Company, a property agency based in Newham reported "a growth in population and a shortage of new builds". This means that landlords have enough demand to charge more or less what they please for a property. Frequently rents are far beyond the reach of many, who are then forced to resort to illegal sub-letting at lower rates.

The irony is, of course, that if they were not sub-letting a council

New housing fraud legislation - Needed or ineffective posturing?

Continued from the opposite page

property, the same property could be used to house people in a similar situation, or perhaps even themselves. The problem of rising rents, falling incomes, and an increasing need for

low-cost housing is a tricky one, and one unlikely to be solved by a simple crackdown on sub-letting. Perhaps what is needed is more social housing as a whole, which would reduce

demand for property and reduce demand for low-cost rents of the type which encourage the greedy to sub-let.

Emma Moore is a freelance writer and journalist.

Keep taking the tablets – Places for People & PIMSS Data Systems

Places for People has just implemented PIMSS Data Systems' new tablet solution, pimss4tablets, for all of its surveying operations.

Dean Moran from Places for People said, "We had been exploring mobile technology for some time, but we found that the available solutions were either unreliable or expensive so when pimss4tablets came along we were keen to explore it. Within six months we had evaluated a range of mobile devices, installed the product, completed testing and were up and running across the UK."



Places for People now uses pimss4tablets for all of its surveys, allowing its staff to spend more time on site surveying, helping tenants and managing work programmes.

Moran added, "The solution reduces travel time and has freed our asset management back-office staff to focus on planning and strategy rather than data entry."



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1st Touch launches self-service app

1st Touch has launched a self-service app which lets tenants submit requests online for a wide range of services, ranging from repairs and maintenance or estate management concerns through to arranging visits from housing officers or conducting rent queries. The system reduces the pressure on the housing provider's call centre staff while significantly enhancing positive engagement with tenants. The app can be integrated in real-time with all leading housing management systems.

When a tenant is using the app to report a repair, for example, the app will raise a request and ask the tenant to choose an appointment from three or four available time slots. Once selected, the app will then auto-schedule the repair and send it to the maintenance operative's mobile device when they are due to attend. If a tenant needs to report an issue such as graffiti, the app will raise the request with the appropriate operative or contractor and inform the tenant when the graffiti is due to be removed and also when the job has been completed. All the requests and actions generated through the app are automatically fed into the relevant housing management system.

The app, which integrates with all existing 1st Touch systems, also represents significant value for money. 1st Touch's research estimates that on average, each call to a housing provider's call centre costs around £5 and that each personal visit costs around £14. As many of the issues handled by these call centres can be dealt with online, the potential savings from the self-service tenant app are considerable.

Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch, said, "By allowing tenants to sort out issues themselves 24/7 online and at their own convenience, our self-service app provides a better customer experience while reducing the service delivery costs of their housing provider."

Adactus conducts fire-safety checks by smartphone with Parabola

Parabola Software has simplified fire-safety inspections for Adactus Housing by developing a low-cost app for smartphones and tablets. The project was delivered in six weeks and the development costs were less than £10,000.



The app, which uses Microsoft SharePoint Online, works on any device using Android, iOS or Windows. Online automation eliminates the errors and delays associated with paper records, and gives Adactus an immediate up-to-date record of the fire-safety status of all its 150 general needs properties with communal areas.

Gary Heaton, head of property services, Adactus Housing, said, "This app puts us in control of our fire-safety checks and helps us stay compliant. The software guides our caretaker team step-by-step through the checking process. When the

inspection's over, we can immediately tell if anything's been overlooked and if the caretaker found any problems.

"The Parabola app was an easy choice because we didn't have to buy special equipment or software licences. It took less than a month to develop and cost far less than proprietary mobile-workforce solutions."

Adactus reported that the app is as popular with its roving caretakers as it is with the management team. There's no paperwork for them to complete, the app gives them a simple checklist of inspection tasks, and they don't

have to return to base to file reports. In addition, all inspections are time- and date-stamped, and reports are filed with GPS location data, helping Adactus to improve staff utilisation.

Richard Gray, managing director, Parabola Software, said, "Apps like this are adaptable to most types of remote data collection, such as property inspections, tenant support or anything in which remote workers capture data. Smartphone automation is an inexpensive way to gather data and feed it straight back into the housing management system."

Hillcrest scheduled for mobile with 1st Touch & ServicePower



Hillcrest Housing Association has chosen a new mobile workforce solution from 1st Touch, along with a dynamic appointment scheduling system from ServicePower. The combined systems are expected to deliver more efficient service delivery and an enhanced experience for the housing provider's tenants.

With the integrated 1st Touch and ServicePower solution, Hillcrest's customer service team can now take repair request calls from tenants which are raised in Hillcrest's Aareon housing management system. The request is then fired into 1st Touch which allocates the right operatives to respond according to the skills required. In turn, this generates a range of appointments in ServicePower, which can be offered to the tenant while still on the phone.

ServicePower then schedules the appointment, texting the tenant with a confirmation of the date and time. 1st Touch sends the details of that job along with all other upcoming jobs, in the most efficient order, to an operative's PDA or handheld device. The system directs the operative to call the tenant once they are actually on their way. Once a job is completed, 1st Touch prompts the operative to conduct a satisfaction survey with the tenant and finally all data relevant to that job is then sent back to the Aareon back-office system.

Mark Flattery IT manager, Hillcrest Housing Association, said, "We were previously managing our workforce manually and there was a recognition of the benefit of using this kind of technology to keep our workforce mobile and also to improve the quality of information that goes into Aareon and our appointments system.

"Combined, 1st Touch and ServicePower will transform our maintenance operations. As a result of the efficiencies and productivity benefits, we will be able to do more jobs each day than before. There are also fuel savings to take into account,

along with an increase in satisfaction survey returns undertaken when jobs are completed."

Mark Percival managing director of maintenance services, Hillcrest Housing Association, added, "1st Touch has delivered an improved system that streamlines the management of our maintenance operatives. In addition, the tenants themselves are much happier with the electronic appointment booking system, especially the use of calls to confirm that operatives are on their way."

Hillcrest is now planning to roll the combined 1st Touch and ServicePower system out to other areas including voids, gas, estate management teams and van stocking.

Mobile gains for Broadacres



Broadacres Housing Association has introduced mobile workforce software from 1st Touch for its repairs and maintenance operations, three years after bringing them in-house.

Chris Fawcett, ICT manager, Broadacres Housing Association, said, "We chose 1st Touch as it had an existing integration with our Aareon housing management system. In addition, with our housing stock spread over a very large area, including many rural locations with limited network coverage, we needed a solution that would work offline. 1st Touch proved ideal as it has a 'smart airtime' feature that only sends information in short encrypted bursts when a signal is available."

Tom Gallafant, a business analyst at Broadacres, said, "We're currently using the Windows mobile version running on a Motorola MC65 device.

However, we are thinking about extending our use of 1st Touch to include its multi-platform device capabilities so that we can also use it with iPhones, iPads and Android devices."

Katherine Proctor, repairs manager of Broadacres, said, "The system gives us greater visibility of what the operatives are working on and their performance. We can therefore capture a lot of KPIs such as the 'number of first-time fixes' or where there was no access possible.

"The software also gives us an automatic link with Jewsons for ordering materials. The operatives carry a certain amount of van stock which is listed on their PDAs. When that stock needs to be replenished, they can place an order through the PDA which goes automatically to Jewsons which has the goods ready for collection next time the operative is passing."

Broadacres reported that since the 1st Touch system went live, the number of jobs completed by each operative has increased in some areas from 4.5 jobs a day to 6.5 jobs per day, representing an increase in overall productivity of almost 50 per cent.



Fawcett added, "We are now looking at the other 1st Touch modules to use across our services, including tenancy management, estate management and anti-social behaviour management modules. In addition, welfare reform is a big challenge for us so having a mobile solution in the housing services and income management side of the organisation will be really important."



Power to the tenants

Robert Dent, Chief Executive, 1st Touch

Having seen many social housing providers strive to place their tenants' needs at the top of their priority list when investing in new systems such as mobile workforce technology, Robert Dent, CEO of 1st Touch, looks at the latest trend that places even more power in their tenants' hands; the introduction of tenancy self-service technology and applications.

When I first joined 1st Touch in 2009, the use of mobile workforce technology in housing was primarily to control, manage and support the activities of responsive repairs operatives equipped with ruggedised PDAs or handheld devices such as smartphones. In those days, it was pushing the boundaries if the software's use was extended to gas and electric operatives, as was the prospect of securing a deal with builders merchants for ordering van stock replenishment via the PDA. Back then, the focus of my own company was largely on developing tight integrations with the leading back-office housing management systems.

New mobile trends

Roll forwards to today and a revolution has taken place, with mobile and related technologies spreading throughout the enterprise, as a proof of the adage that 'the real value of data lies in the evolution of its use over time'. Mobile workforce technology is now used for an increasingly broad range of applications, from asset management and stock surveying to estate management, legionnaires' monitoring, social care and supporting the work of housing officers. By incorporating modules for all of these and more, we found that there were other new trends to take into account, such as BYOD and the need to operate across multiple platforms and devices, including iOS and Android. The recent welfare reforms have also seen the

development of mobile payment systems for income officers.

Certainly, being able to offer a wide range of modules and device options as part of a single integrated range does seem to have appealed to housing IT managers, if only because it promises even greater efficiencies than supporting multiple technology vendors. It also ensures that senior management has a single view of KPIs across the enterprise.

However, probably the biggest single development in the evolution of social housing technology is happening right now. This is the introduction of tenancy apps such as tenancy self-service technology. This opens a whole world of customer service and development possibilities.

24/7 access

Previously, tenants wishing to access the services of their landlord have needed to contact their housing provider's call centre during working hours. A good tenancy self-service system should therefore enable a housing provider's tenants to submit routine requests online 24/7 for a wide range of services, at their own convenience.

These can range from repairs and maintenance or estate management concerns, such as reporting graffiti and anti-social behaviour, through to arranging visits from housing officers or conducting rent account queries. Such a system should significantly reduce the pressure on the housing provider's call centre staff, while enhancing positive engagement with tenants. It also allows call centre staff to spend more time with those who do call, especially those with the greatest need or more complex queries.

If one was to take our own system as an example, when a tenant reports a

repair, the system will raise a request and ask the resident to describe their needs in detail and, if possible, to upload photos or videos. The tenant can then choose an appointment for a repairs operative to visit from three or four time slots.

Once the appointment is selected, the system will then auto-schedule the repair and send the details through the mobile workforce management system to the maintenance operative's mobile device when they are due to attend. Either texts or calls to the customers can then be scheduled; both to confirm the upcoming appointment and also to advise them that the operative is on their way.

However, if a tenant reports an issue such as graffiti, the tenancy self-service system will raise the request with the appropriate operative or specialist contractor and inform the tenant of the date when the graffiti is due to be removed. It will also inform them by text once the job has been completed.

Shifting the costs online

The introduction of a tenancy self-service system not only boosts accessibility and tenant engagement, it also delivers significant value for money. Our latest research across a large number of housing providers found that each call to their call centre costs them between £5 and £10, and that each visit to a tenant costs around £20. As many of the issues handled by call centres and housing officers can be dealt with online, one can clearly see that the potential savings from the introduction of a tenancy self-service app are huge.

However, to get the real value out of a tenancy self-service app, it needs to be part of a tightly integrated, enterprise-wide system that includes

Power to the tenants

Continued from the opposite page

an advanced scheduling application for appointment generation and a comprehensive mobile workforce management system to direct the operatives. This integration with scheduling and workforce management makes a huge difference.

When the request comes in online and the appointment is booked on the system, all the requests and actions generated, through the self-service facility, will then be automatically fed through to the housing provider's housing management system. In our case, we have ensured that our tenancy self-service app also links seamlessly to our ServicePower-based scheduling system along with all other existing 1st Touch systems.

By delivering such tremendous customer and service delivery benefits, it's clear to me that this whole area will grow rapidly and evolve much further. In time, there will no doubt be an even wider range of other services available online through systems such as this. Indeed, the creative potential for both software developers and housing providers is exceptional.

Growth in self-service

One can also clearly see the potential for growth in the range and breadth of self-service applications when one looks at the broader context of the public's acceptance of technology and, in particular, mobile services. With a population that is getting ever more confident about using web and

mobile technology, and with many pundits predicting that m-commerce is set to explode, the chances are that tenants will more readily adopt online services.

If this is the case, then the tenant-generated demand for self-service tools will also rise and in turn drive even greater investment. If one looks back in another five years, I am confident that the balance may well have switched, so that the majority of routine tasks will be requested online by web-aware tenants through self-service systems.

Robert Dent is chief executive of 1st Touch.

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT



Arena launches Tracker Suite 2014

Arena Partnership is releasing a new version of its Tracker Suite software for tenant interaction, resident profiling, satisfaction surveys and community intervention programmes.

Key developments and enhancements in Tracker 2014 include personalised screens so users can focus on the functions they need, access via PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone, quick-view dashboards for easier data access, the option to record resident involvement with different levels of detail, and the addition of texting and face-to-face surveys to the existing range of postal, phone and online options.

Alan Marshall, managing director, Arena Partnership, said, "After extensive research with users last autumn, Tracker

2014 was then written from the ground up so that it delivers as many of the requirements as were practical, including working with all of the latest devices.

"The new version has also already enabled us to sign up a number of new users including Aldwyk Housing, First Choice Homes and Selwood Housing, all of which are eager to start using the new software and reap the benefits."

Collaborative relationship management with Gentoo and Orchard

Orchard and Gentoo Group are using their shared experiences to develop a new Sales CRM system, built by Orchard from the ground up, to enable both organisations to understand their customers better and to sell their growing range of products and services.

For both North Eastern organisations,

effective CRM is becoming more important in a world of shifting communication channels. Over the past few years, Orchard has responded to its customers' needs by developing a number of new technologies to manage inbound and outbound communications by SMS, social media, mobile applications and self-service.

Dubbed 'collaborative relationship management' by the two organisations, the new Sales CRM system will result in better sales forecasting as well as campaign management. Orchard has also incorporated a new B2B customer dashboard to give users a 360-degree view of the customer.



Do you know who you spoke to before?

Simon Stackhouse, Business Development Manager, BancTec

Simon Stackhouse from BancTec explains why good case management can be the key to happy families in social housing.

Managing and assigning social housing has always been a socially- and politically-charged task. With continued money saving and lengthy decision-making processes, an effective case management system is critical.

Injustices and failed complaints procedures within social housing have been relatively well documented in the press in recent years. The introduction of policies such as the spare bedroom tax have created confusion among tenants. Queries, complaints and housing assignment must all be dealt with efficiently; without a system to organise incoming communications, managing these as well as the assigning of housing effectively will be difficult. A case management system can avoid these issues.

Collaborative case management

Case management allows for the collaborative management of tenant information from multiple sources. This allows for easy access to data whenever and wherever it is needed, making complaints procedures, decision making and communication efficient and effective. It ensures any incoming communication, whether by phone, email, letter, in person or social media, is documented and applied to a single profile.

For the majority of housing providers, the primary contact with tenants is over the telephone or by letter. However, these two contact points will often not actually be linked. A lack of case management has recently been made evident by this winter's flooding; severe delays in dealing with essential complaints and repairs demonstrated a failure by many housing providers to effectively deal with and manage communications.

Housing providers are not deliberately choosing to ignore their tenants. Rather, it seems they are overloaded

and unable to manage all of the enquiries and complaints they receive. This often results in tenants escalating their complaint to the housing ombudsman. The issue here is time. In many situations, the housing ombudsman is involved purely because housing providers cannot cope with a high number of enquiries, not because they are dealing with them badly. Lots of time could be saved and productivity increased, resulting in more queries resolved successfully, through the adoption of a case management system.

Access to case files

An effective case management system would allow housing providers to hold a case profile of every tenant. This would contain all of the communication the client has had with the housing provider, no matter what communication channel they chose. Whenever a tenant gets in contact, it will be documented within an individual case file. This means as soon as the tenant gets back in touch with the housing association, no matter how they got in contact before, the member of staff handling the request will be able to track and examine the full case history, avoiding the question of 'do you know who you spoke to before?'.

Case management systems also allow social media enquiries to be contained within a case. There is a growing trend for people to complain via social media feeds, based on the expectation that by complaining publicly, the organisation in question will be more inclined to respond and do something about the complaint in order to avoid further embarrassment. Most organisations originally started social media feeds with the intention of marketing and distributing information, however, with so many people using social media to complain, their role has significantly changed.

Dealing with social media

Research has shown that 58 per cent of people who tweet about a bad

experience expect the company in question to respond, with 42 per cent expecting a response within an hour. This significant consumer pressure demonstrates the necessity to adopt case management in order to ensure every social media communication is treated in the same way as an incoming email or letter.

The assigning of new council homes and the management of waiting lists is one of the most controversial areas housing providers have to manage. The benefit case management can bring to this is an overall view of each applicant's case history. For example, details such as ASB records from previous tenancies can be fed into a single case of an individual as well as their complaint history, allowing for an overall view when assigning housing.

As another example, someone whose case history shows that they have had noise complaints from previous neighbours directed at them can therefore be assigned away from high rise residences or shared accommodations. Case management allows for this decision to be made much faster by consolidating all relevant evidence into a single place in front of the decision maker.

Case management systems allow housing providers to prioritise, seeing the key flashpoint areas and concerns of their tenants by placing all communications from an individual in one place, via multiple access points no matter how they chose to communicate. The key benefit of this to both housing providers and tenants is an increase in efficiency. Local government and housing providers are regularly considered inefficient and slow to respond. By contrast, case management gives housing staff all the available information on an individual case in one place, increasing efficiency and speeding up the process.

Simon Stackhouse is the business development manager for BancTec.



Optevia wins Dynamics CRM deal at A2Dominion

A2Dominion Group has selected Optevia to implement Microsoft Dynamics CRM across its entire property sales and marketing department.

The housing provider previously used an old database and spreadsheets to capture and share data. This was both limiting in terms of collaboration and business intelligence. A2Dominion therefore decided to buy a new CRM system to provide a single solution that could be applied across all sales and marketing requirements for the group.

In July 2013, A2Dominion and its technology partner Optevia developed a proof of concept for a property sales solution. A2Dominion approved this prototype and in January 2014 began a project to deliver a private sales and shared ownership solution for its sales and marketing teams built on Microsoft Dynamics CRM 2013.

Trevor Whitaker, head of business systems, A2Dominion Group, said, "We chose Optevia to build this tailored CRM system because it not only has housing-sector expertise, but also has wider industry experience to help us create a more corporate environment.

"Optevia was also keen to help us with the proof of concept so that the IT team could verify the true value to the business. The goal for our sales and marketing team is to have one system for recording and sharing all information relating to leads, opportunities and contacts, a streamlined process for marketing to potential clients, along with a more efficient process for forecasting sales and reporting."



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Salix Homes takes on SmartVoice ViewPoint



Salix Homes is now using SmartVoice ViewPoint, a customer feedback system from Sinclair Voicenet, in order to get a better understanding of tenant satisfaction levels and improve services to tenants. The system is being paid for on a per-survey basis, without requiring any capital expense.

Replacing the manual, paper-based surveys used in the past by the housing provider, SmartVoice ViewPoint will allow up to 3,500 surveys to be automatically carried out each month by telephone, web or SMS, with tenants given a wider choice regarding how they complete the surveys, with the aim of increasing response rates and providing Salix Homes with better feedback.

Salix Homes can now conduct IVR (interactive voice response) surveys immediately after calls while they are still fresh in the minds of tenants. It will help to increase first-time fix rates and reduce the number of unnecessary and costly repeat service visits, with automatic alerts sent to managers by SMS or email if results fall outside acceptable limits.

Pam Roberts, customer relationship manager, Salix Homes, said, "SmartVoice ViewPoint will allow our customer insight team to automate the entire survey process and deliver cost savings by allowing us to redeploy staff to other productive activities. The system will give us an effective way to manage the full customer journey from initial point of contact to resolution.

"Sinclair Voicenet's customer feedback system will improve our ability to assess how we measure up to published operational performance indicators such as the percentage of calls answered within 30 seconds, appointments kept and emergency repairs completed on time."

In addition, Salix Homes now has a web-based dashboard where real-time business intelligence can be viewed and a comprehensive range of reporting tools can be used to create and deliver bespoke reports to designated staff and stakeholders.

Solihull Community Housing joins the Rental Exchange

Solihull Community Housing has signed up to sharing information on its tenants' rental payments with the Rental Exchange, a partnership between Experian and Big Issue Invest.

By sharing information on how its tenants pay their rent, Solihull Community Housing will be able to assist in strengthening the credit histories of over 10,000 tenants, helping

them gain access to more affordable credit. It will also enable tenants to prove their identity online to help them, for example, access current accounts and insurance.

An initial survey of its tenants revealed that a majority was already keen to have their rent payment history included in their credit reports to help improve their credit scores.

This was particularly true for the younger generations (76 per cent of 18-45 year-olds).

Chris Deery, head of ICT, Solihull Community Housing, said, "As well as often having to make do with the more expensive credit options, so many housing tenants struggle to access a range of basic services, such as opening a bank account or taking out

insurance, simply because organisations cannot identify them electronically.

"The majority of our tenants pay their rent regularly and on time, and there is currently no recognition for paying this major commitment. We wanted to make sure our tenants were given the credit they deserve for fulfilling this commitment every month."

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SMAC your IT up

Social, Mobile, Analytics and Cloud in housing



With the combination of social media, mobile, big data analytics and cloud (SMAC) gaining wider awareness as being possibly the next wave of technology, Housing Technology interviewed SMAC exponents from Caltech IT, Ciber and Clearview Systems about how SMAC could be used by housing providers.

What is SMAC?

Most housing providers have already adopted at least one or two of the SMAC technologies, most commonly mobile and, to a lesser extent, cloud and social media, with only a few instances of true big data analytics. In short, the theory behind SMAC is that while each technology is worthwhile in its own right, the real benefits in terms of operational processes, value for money, tenant engagement, customer services and so on are from where each of the four technologies enhances the others.

Mark Hobart, Clearview Systems' managing director, said, "SMAC offers the ability to combine new data sources such as social media feeds with traditional enterprise data to deliver new insights to improve business performance and customer services, while the mobility and cloud aspects are a potential means of delivery."



"To benefit from SMAC data, housing providers will need to find the right tools to access and understand it, resulting in the ability to exploit the data to spot trends and opportunities."

Phil Callaghan, managing director, Caltech IT



"One can apply hindsight to the fates of Blockbuster, Kodak, HMV and Borders, all of which were high-profile victims of changes in technology, but in five years' time, I suspect CIOs will ask each other, did you see SMAC coming?"

Paul Swannell, sales manager for social housing, Ciber UK

Phil Callaghan, managing director of Caltech IT, added, "Social media, mobile, analytics and cloud (SMAC) is where each of these enables another to maximise its effect. SMAC is about the creation or transformation of processes as well as the technology that supports those processes."

Extending existing services

The benefits of SMAC appear to be based around a 'virtuous circle' of more accurate analytical insight, leading to better decision-making, and from there to better services to tenants and performance improvements, very often from taking a holistic view of the individual existing implementations of social media, mobile, analytics and cloud.

Paul Swannell, sales manager for social housing at Ciber, said, "SMAC should be considered as a set of complementary technologies. For example, the extension of social media to engage with tenants, suppliers and partners is likely to increase the volume of communications but at the same time, it will increase the volume and value of available data. Combining analytics in this scenario will help to distil information and insight from what could otherwise be the 'noise' of big data."

Caltech IT's Callaghan said, "SMAC stacks provide a lot of power and, in short, can make interactions leaner, faster, smarter and clearer. For

example, for a housing provider that is participating in social networking, this can offer valuable insight into a large data set, to find out what excites and drives residents. By including social CRM, housing providers can work out how to communicate better with their tenants.

"Equally, giving housing officers and maintenance staff mobile tools extends their connection to the office; by allowing a housing officer to get a full picture of a particular resident before visiting, such as rent arrears, outstanding maintenance, reported ASBs or other factors, and align this with social media, you will have a full picture of every resident so you can exceed their expectations."

An alternative view about extending housing providers' existing implementations of the SMAC technologies was expressed by Clearview Systems' Hobart who said, "On its own, it doesn't extend existing services. It needs a concerted effort to want to leverage social media and other data to drive performance improvement. Once that happens, analytics will rapidly come to the fore. Mobile and cloud are inevitably involved, but relevant data and analysis are the most important parts."

Why SMAC?

As mentioned above, the main reasons for adopting a SMAC strategy are to gain a better understanding of and communication with tenants, enable more efficient working practices and cost reductions (such as through more tenant self-service, less administrative work or time spent travelling).

SMAC your IT up

Continued from opposite page

Ciber's Swannell said, "First, SMAC will enable housing providers to glean better insights into their tenants and in doing so shape the services they offer. Perhaps more pressing in light of Welfare Reform, predictive analytics has the potential to highlight tenants at greatest risk, allowing scarce resources to be focused where most needed.

"Secondly, SMAC is a key enabler of self-service and, as long as effective back-office integration is in place, this will deliver the twin benefits of lower cost-to-serve and increased tenant satisfaction. And thirdly, mobile and cloud support internal efficiencies, giving flexible access to systems and data, anywhere, anytime. This reduces the need for travel, cuts down data re-keying, and means a better job can be done in customer-facing situations."



"The biggest issue for SMAC implementations will be the marshalling and governance of data. The more data you have, the greater the risk of exposing it by mistake."

Mark Hobart, managing director,
Clearview Systems

Hobart said, "I think the relevance of social media and big data to the housing sector has not yet been fully established. Innovation in service delivery, engagement and bi-directional communications with tenants will drive the agenda here and at some stage the 'relevance link' to the sector will be made and 'Eureka', a new breed of technology will be required to make sense of it all."

Teething problems

The main hurdle to the adoption of a SMAC strategy seems to be not only dealing with the vast amounts of data likely to be generated by SMAC, but also establishing which data is important and which is just 'noise'.

Callaghan from Caltech IT said, "There is a vast amount of data out there, hence the 'big data' explosion of 2013. To benefit from the data,

housing providers will need to find the right user friendly tools to access and understand it, resulting in the ability to exploit the data to spot trends and opportunities."

Ciber's Swannell said, "Given the typical heterogeneous application landscape of most housing providers, integration is certainly going to be a hot topic; how do you build a roadmap for a SMAC architecture when a dozen or more core business applications have no common data structures and may evolve in varied ways? Furthermore, from a customer interaction perspective, how do you ensure your social and mobile 'front-ends' do not generate a manual administrative headache in isolated back-end processes?"

Changing role of the CIO

The adoption of a SMAC strategy and its effect on the role of a housing provider's CIO or head of IT can be seen in two ways. From one perspective, it moves the IT function much closer to the heart of the organisation, while from another perspective, it's merely the logical continuation of what the IT department is likely to be already doing.

Swannell said, "One can apply hindsight to the fates of Blockbuster, Kodak, HMV and Borders, all of which were high-profile victims of changes in technology, but in five years' time, I suspect CIOs will ask each other, did you see SMAC coming?"

Security implications

As with standalone cloud services, security concerns around SMAC are commonplace, particularly as SMAC strategies are likely to expose more data externally, but most enterprise-class cloud services are in reality more secure than on-premise servers.

Ciber's Swannell said, "External-facing systems, consumed on a wider range of devices and hosted on cloud-based platforms, will increasingly require

careful consideration by IT. While it is critical that these solutions are secured properly, it is also vital that adoption is not hampered by outdated policies or even prejudice.

"Enterprise-grade cloud applications and platforms can sometimes be dismissed out-of-hand due to IT policies, when in reality they can offer greater levels of security and resilience when compared to on-premise systems running on outdated infrastructure."

Clearview Systems' Hobart said, "All of the current SMAC technologies have their own security models which should fit well with traditional IT infrastructures. I think the biggest issue will be not so much security but the marshalling and governance of data. The more data you have, the greater the risk of exposing it by mistake."

Hybrid IT infrastructures and applications

Swannell from Ciber concluded, "SMAC shouldn't be seen as a bolt-on to existing applications and infrastructure; the hybrid platforms and infrastructure of today will continue to evolve and it is the role of IT and service providers to ensure convergence with SMAC, rather than changes in opposing directions.

"In terms of applications, as well as an accelerating move to the cloud, mobility will soon become a given. Forward-thinking vendors are already moving away from mobile 'app' versions of their applications; instead creating user interfaces common to all devices, supporting seamless device-sensitive experiences across PCs, tablets, and smartphones."

Housing Technology would like to thank Phil Callaghan (Caltech IT), Paul Swannell (Ciber UK) and Mark Hobart (Clearview Systems) for agreeing to be interviewed for this article.



Wales & West's free wi-fi with Meraki and BT



Wales & West Housing, in collaboration with Meraki and British Telecom, recently reached its first milestone in deploying its free tenant wi-fi project powered by Meraki wireless access points.

So far, six networks comprising 34 MR12 access points have been installed in both North and South Wales, providing connections for over 250 separate devices.

The points are installed in Wales & West Housing's residential properties as part of its digital inclusion programme and supports the organisation's plan to roll out free wi-fi to as many of its tenants across Wales as possible.

Wales & West Housing has also been working with BT's Digital Champions as part of the scheme, with BT arranging for pupils from local schools to provide coaching sessions for older tenants and showing them how to use Facebook, Twitter, Skype and Google.

The scheme will eventually result in more than 300 access points in over 100 locations across Wales, with the ease of administration using the Meraki Cloud Dashboard proving critical to enabling the delivery of the project.

Marc Pensom, ICT infrastructure manager, Wales & West Housing said, "The ease of configuration and management via the cloud dashboard makes the administration of large



numbers of devices feasible for a relatively small central team.

"The scheme enables tenants to use the internet in their own home whenever they want, using equipment of their choice. By the end of the project, we will have provided almost 3,000 tenants with access to the internet."

Teenage digital champions bridge the generation gap

Sixth formers from Michaelston Community College joined residents at Wales & West Housing's Oldwell Court in Cardiff to show them how to use the internet.

The initiative is part of the housing provider's digital inclusion programme and is the first time that a social housing provider in Wales has joined forces with BT's Digital Champions programme.

Oldwell Court resident Anne Halliday said, "I've had an amazing time and learnt a lot. My tablet is only a few months old and because I've had a

stroke, it has helped me tremendously with my memory, as well as opening up a new world to me.

"I think having the pupils here to teach us is a fantastic idea for us oldies. Some may think that we can't do certain things, but, as I say, we can do anything as long as we are helped a little to get started."

Jason Williams from Michaelston Community College said, "I was surprised how well the residents picked everything up; they didn't really need a lot of help. I went through social media, email access and getting onto the internet – a bit of everything really."

To date, 1,300 pupils from nine schools across Wales have joined the BT Digital Champions programme. As an added incentive, participating pupils can also get tickets for Rock Assembly, a free afternoon concert at Wembley Arena on July 9 hosted by Radio One DJ Nihal.

Richard Troote, head of information communications technology, Wales & West Housing, said, "I am delighted at how successful this day was. The pupils did a great job in helping our residents at Oldwell Court gain the most from the internet and the equipment that they already have, and I am thrilled that they are making arrangements to repeat this session on a regular basis."



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Trident wins InMotion award for digital inclusion

Trident Social Investment Group was awarded 'project of the year' at the recent InMotion event run by Kirona and Xmbrace DRS for its 'digital by design' DI programme. The other housing providers short-listed for the award included CityWest Homes, Coastline Housing and Town & Country Housing Group.

Trident reported that it had faced many challenges over the last few years but none as testing as the pressures imposed by Welfare Reform. The main aim of the digital by design project was to increase the use of online services as well as ensuring that Trident's tenants have the opportunity to become digitally literate and confident with technology. To this end, Trident's IT team even gave up their own time to deliver training to tenants.



Ann Rivera, Director of Organisational Development, Trident Social Investment Group

The desired outcome of the project was to increase the IT literacy of

Trident tenants so they could use online services, many of whom have come from the homeless route or have English as a second language. Realising the threat of proposed Welfare Reform changes, the team wanted to use their own skills to help tenants access online services and become more digitally included.

42 computers for tenants' use across eight sites were installed, as well as finding a number of local internet cafes and libraries with computer suites. The team has delivered state-of-the-art facilities to support some of the most vulnerable people across the Midlands by providing them with the skills and confidence to get online and preparing them for the 'digital by default' changes introduced from 2013 onwards.

The Trident IT team ensured that the computer facilities were fit for purpose and met the wide-ranging needs of the tenants. The technical specifications



can also not be underestimated, ranging from 3-D graphics, office software, video software and broadband (100Mb uncontended upload and download), all delivered through flat-screen PCs and high specification desktop computers.

Trident's results speak for themselves:

- The suites have seen a massive increase in usage, with the facilities being used by over 1,300 people, with requests for new courses increasing every week;
- 60+ basic computer skills and employment-related training courses have been delivered by Trident's IT team, in addition to their full-time jobs;
- A 32 per cent growth in the use of online tools available from Trident and increased communication with tenants as well as reaching tenants with long-standing arrears for whom back-dated benefit claims have been achieved;
- A large number of digitally-excluded tenants living in one of the most disadvantaged areas in the UK now have better opportunities for employment and education.

Ann Rivera, director of organisational development, Trident Social Investment Group, said, "Being online is a very important factor for work, learning and recreational use. Good digital skills and access to technology allows us to benefit in many ways such as saving money through online shopping, paying bills and giving access to new opportunities. We are very proud that our programme has delivered these benefits for our residents."

One Trident resident commented, "As a frequent user of the community computer room facility, I would like to thank and commend all of the IT staff for the newly installed equipment that is helping us tenants in our job searches and business start-up activities."

Trident deploys CGFirst Board Portal on iPads

Trident Social Investment Group has continued to roll out its green and paperless strategy by moving its board meetings to the cloud using CGFirst. Trident has reduced its paper output by 100s of reams a month by introducing Apple iPads to the boardroom.

Using CGFirst has halved the time it takes Trident's administrative staff to produce board packs as it was taking up to 40 hours per month assembling materials, having them copied, bound and packaged. With board members spread across the West Midlands, they can now access documents via the cloud through their tablets.

Ed Reed, head of ICT, Trident Social Investment Group, said, "The main benefits of the CGFirst app have been the significant cost savings and a demonstration of leadership to internal and external stakeholders, with transparent corporate governance, and technology adoption."



Board members can now share documents securely and use an online hub to record and access documents anywhere, anytime. The CG Board Portal places all records in one place, has reminders for important actions, progresses notifications and online indicators, and provides recommendations for good governance. There are also multiple access levels for board, executive, staff, investors and external service providers.

Reed said, "iPads were the chosen device because they were already adopted within the organisation and were regarded as a trusted platform and easy to use. They make for a great meeting experience as participants engage in across-the-table discussions."

WM Housing's boost with Social Telecoms



WM Housing Group has signed a two-year contract with Social Telecoms to provide mobile phones for the business and help with their digital inclusion strategy. As part of the deal, Social Telecoms has given £5,000 towards WM Housing's

digital inclusion project, to help its tenants get online using kiosk computer terminals in the group's offices in Coventry, Birmingham, Hereford, and Worcester.

The kiosks will give tenants access to the internet and use it to pay bills and access online accounts securely. The donation will also help towards installing wi-fi across all of its offices and helping more tenants with access to broadband at home.

Ian Tinsley, director of ICT, WM Housing, said: "We are delighted to be working with Social Telecoms. The company's status as a social enterprise means that it shares many of our values and fits in with what we are trying to achieve as an organisation."

Digital inclusion guide from Carnegie Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust has launched a seven-step guide to digital inclusion aimed at local authorities, housing providers and other public- and voluntary-sector organisations, providing an easy-to-use toolkit for them to help get people online.

The report showcases six different approaches used to encourage people online in Liverpool, Glasgow, Leeds, Sunderland, Wiltshire and Fife. These include training volunteer digital champions to help share skills and

knowledge, making affordable broadband available in social housing, and a bus kitted out with the latest technology to take digital to communities and demonstrate how it can be used.

The report can be downloaded from www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications. Housing Technology's 'Digital by Default' report can still be downloaded free of charge from www.housing-technology.com.

INFRASTRUCTURE

SecurEnvoy's tokenless two-factor authentication in housing

SecurEnvoy has developed a tokenless two-factor authentication method so that housing staff working remotely can easily and efficiently log into networks using devices such as smartphones.

SecurEnvoy lets housing providers and local authorities use smartphones, laptops or tablets as authentication devices. One method is to send a dynamically-generated password to the employee's mobile device via SMS or email. The password received is then combined with the user's login information to achieve tokenless two-factor authentication.

For many years, non-office staff at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London carried a dedicated, physical token, which generated access codes for network authentication purposes. However, tokens were frequently lost or left behind and the constant need to replace them led to increased operating costs.

Russell Hookway, network and telecommunications manager, Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, said, "We had already given mobile phones to more than 1,000 employees so we wanted to make greater use of

this investment and save on the cost of dedicated tokens."

Dundee City Council also now uses SecurEnvoy's tokenless two-factor authentication in order to address security concerns relating to location-independent network access by its staff.

Graeme Quinn, IT team leader, Dundee City Council, said, "We wanted to improve the security of our VPNs and liked the easy and secure network access process offered by an SMS-based method. Almost everyone has a mobile phone so the overall costs can be managed."

Shared services, shared success

*Andrew Dale, Head of IT, Shropshire Housing Group
Ian Pritchard, IT Manager, Severnside Housing*

Towards the end of 2010, Severnside Housing and Shropshire Housing Group created an initiative to partner on the delivery of IT services to both organisations, now known as unTe Solutions.

The original intention of the initiative was to provide IT resource-sharing for skills transfer, procurement savings and value for money by having greater buying power. This included having a joint IT strategy and common working practices, due to the similar size, structure and geographic spread of both organisations.

Severnside Housing has two offices in Shrewsbury that manage around 5,000 properties, employs 240 staff, and has an electrical contracting business and a homelessness division. And in partnership with Social Telecoms, Severnside set up a Digital Den which helps with local digital inclusion.

Shropshire Housing manages 4,500 properties and employs 290 staff, alongside its Total Response business for in-house and private repairs work, and is a partner of the Sustain Consortium, providing supported services to in-house and private customers.

Accepting shared IT services

In order to deliver a collaborative IT service that met the original objectives, a number of challenges had to be overcome, including a lack of understanding among the various businesses of what a shared IT service meant in reality and the on-going acceptance of a shared IT service. To deliver a shared service, we had to prioritise tasks and allocate resources accordingly; this led to one business or another feeling there was an unequal service and that one was getting greater benefit from the relationship than the other.

To overcome this, we spent a lot of time making services transparent by improving communication for upcoming projects, forthcoming changes and current issues, as well as reporting on the time spent across each business delivering the IT service. Success and buy-in was primarily achieved through consistent communication to position unTe as a business partner that helps meet the organisations' business objectives, while making changes through evolution rather than revolution. The other challenges that we faced were very widespread, and included some of the following areas.

IT & business alignment

The IT strategies of both organisations had limited alignment with their respective business objectives. To overcome this, we did a complete review of both Shropshire Housing and Severnside Housing's corporate plans, with additional reviews of each directorate's key objectives and issues. The results of these were prioritised to give a roadmap of deliverables. These were used to identify where common solutions could be implemented. A key element to the success of the strategy has been the theming of services into readily understandable sections that show where benefit will be realised.

Service delivery & performance

The policies and procedures that governed IT deliverables and working practices meant that service delivery and performance were below that expected within the business. To address this, the unTe team reviewed the services offered, what the expectations were and what service levels should be delivered. The results were new service level agreements (SLAs) and policies, and targets set for key performance indicator (KPI) measures. By regularly reviewing performance against the KPIs

and SLAs, performance has increased significantly for the delivery of projects and helpdesk services. An additional element to improving services has been the regular review of customer satisfaction with the service unTe provides.

Staff and training

At first, working as an enlarged team across more locations and supporting different business needs resulted in the team being stretched and not understanding differing setups. This affected the initial rollout of the combined service. By focusing effort on staff locations and cross training, issues were overcome while the strategy and planning cycle was in motion.

At the same time, both Shropshire Housing and Severnside Housing have expanded and diversified their services. This has meant an increase in the number of employees, locations and service types being supported. By improving the IT services and working to structured processes, we can support many more staff and locations without having increased the number of IT staff.

Common solutions

Technological differences, deficiencies with some solutions, and some incomplete implementations have been replaced with many common solutions, such as the single internet-based telephony system being used by both organisations. By rolling out common solutions, we have reduced the support requirements by having a single technology with reduced costs involved for licensing, implementation and maintenance.

Digital inclusion & customer service

In order to address digital inclusion, we have worked with our IT suppliers and have also now expanded the

Shared services, shared success

Continued from the opposite page

unTe team to deliver community-based IT services to customers, thus diversifying our own area of work and providing a wider-reaching IT service.

Meanwhile, customer service initiatives to drive improvements for external customers have resulted in greater demands on the use and availability of IT services. The thirst for information can shape the service offered to customers, and the need for timely information has resulted in a complete shift in how information is delivered to the businesses. There is now a dashboard and exception-based reporting solution that shows trends and issues. This gives us the ability from within systems to now quickly find information about customers through a single 'hub' that shows information from various back-office systems.

Staff expectations

In addition, ever-increasing internal staff expectations are such that demands on technologies and services have increased. This has come about through the increasing consumerisation of IT and the expectation that all services should be

accessible remotely and via multiple devices. This has been addressed by providing hardware that is relevant to the role of the employee, and enabling systems that are accessible externally, while maintaining security.

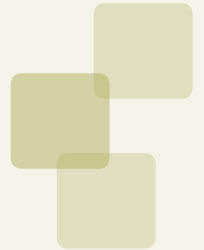
Having gone through the development of a shared IT service, there have been many learning points that can be used in the future should our collaborative work be expanded. The key learning points are focused on communication, service and people, not the technologies that are used. In summary, to achieve a shared collaborative service:

- Ensure consistent and timely communication of change and status of service to enable buy-in to the services offered and to achieve the ultimate success of a shared service.
- Take small steps to change so that services and solutions evolve and can be understood.
- Spend time with IT staff to ensure they are up to date with changes, able to promote changes and are comfortable dealing with people and technologies at differing locations to

provide a consistent and professional service.

- Spend time with key staff within the partnering organisations to ensure the future direction for IT is in line with corporate objectives, and that the services offered are relevant to supporting business services.
- Develop a common strategy that considers the individual needs of each company while giving an overall common direction that is implementable, supportable and cost effective.
- Create an identity and brand for the promotion of IT services for a sense of belonging for the IT team and to give a common point of contact for all staff across all organisations.

Andrew Dale is head of IT at Shropshire Housing Group, and Ian Pritchard is the IT manager at Severnside Housing.



Coast & Country voices heard with SpeakInConfidence

Following feedback on a recent staff survey, Coast & Country Housing has selected SpeakInConfidence to provide confidential, secure communication opportunities between the four members of its leadership team and its 500 employees.

Esme Flounders, communications manager, Coast & Country Housing, said, "We are hoping SpeakInConfidence will help us improve scores for 'do you feel able to engage with the leadership team'. SpeakInConfidence will allow anyone at CCH to send a message direct to any of the leadership team, who in

turn are committed to respond to each and every message.

"SpeakInConfidence will provide a confidential platform for employees to voice any concerns they have, while giving senior managers the ability to respond specifically, yet anonymously. As communication continues, the employee can choose to remain anonymous, or can step forward and continue the conversation on a one-to-one basis."

One of CCH's reasons for choosing the third-party, web-based service was that around 50 per cent of CCH's staff

are field based and therefore don't have access to the corporate intranet or even have a CCH email address.

Flounders added, "We reviewed solutions which could be used with our intranet, but we believed a third party anonymous platform would encourage more staff to speak out about issues that mattered."





Big data – The emergence of the enterprise data hub

Jack Norris, CMO, MapR Technologies

Jack Norris, CMO for MapR Technologies, examines how an enterprise data hub provides an alternative to expanding data silos and spurs innovation within larger organisations.

Organisations are increasingly becoming data driven. For commercial enterprises, data is effectively a competitive weapon that underpins innovation and differentiation. Data-driven companies are rapidly gaining market share and big data is no longer a nice to have, but a necessity. Hadoop is at the centre of the big data revolution and is changing how data is stored, processed and analysed. Hadoop represents a new data and compute stack that provides huge operational advantages and is being used to change how organisations compete.

Data across the enterprise is growing quickly both in terms of volume and data types. Historically, new applications and data sources have resulted in the creation of dedicated information silos. Organisations are struggling today with multiple fast growing data sources with machine-generated log files, sensor data and social media as just a few examples. Instead of erecting more specialised processing and analytic silos to deal with this growth, visionaries are instead deploying enterprise data hubs.

Structured and unstructured data

An enterprise data hub provides a nexus for data sources. The hub may contain data from CRM systems, websites and housing systems as well as external data such as social media, and a myriad of other unstructured data including text and video.

One of the initial uses for an enterprise data hub is to offload processing and data storage from more expensive systems. For example, a data hub can act as an offload area for the Extract, Transform and Load (ETL) processes that prepare data for analysis within data warehouses. Instead of loading large volumes of raw data into a data warehouse and performing complex transforms there (an ELT process), significant speed and cost savings can be realised by performing the transformations directly on the Hadoop cluster.

Offloading to Hadoop

Additional savings are realised by offloading 'cold' data from a data warehouse. The typical cost per terabyte of data contained in a data warehouse is £10,000 and more. In contrast, data can be offloaded to Hadoop for a few hundred pounds, as long as the Hadoop platform has the requisite data availability and protection features so that the data can be stored long-term with confidence.

An enterprise data hub can also support a range of analytics that are performed directly on the data. In essence, Hadoop allows you to load all these different data sets into an expandable cluster of servers and then distribute computational, analysis or indexing workloads across the different servers and data sets. These are applications that combine operational processing as well as analytics to solve a pressing business problem.

Business intelligence & behavioural insights

For example, the digital marketing intelligence provider ComScore, uses Hadoop to process over 1.7 trillion

internet and mobile records every month. ComScore uses this data to produce reports that allow its clients to gain behavioural insights into their mobile and online customers. The move to Hadoop removed several key bottlenecks resulting in a tenfold increase in computation speed.

Another example is Cisco which uses Hadoop as part of its business intelligence processes across large, globally distributed data sets, including structured and unstructured information. The complete infrastructure solution focused around Hadoop lets Cisco analyse service sales opportunities in a tenth of the time and at a tenth of the cost, and to generate \$40 million in incremental service bookings in the last year.

It's no accident that organisations such as ComScore and Cisco have invested in Hadoop as the basis for platforms capable of delivering new insights. The tangible cost benefits, reduction in complexity and ability to scale are all key benefits of the data hub and compelling reasons to examine the Hadoop technology.

Jack Norris is the CMO of MapR Technologies.

Netwrix report on IT changes

A survey by Netwrix has found that almost 60 per cent of IT professionals have made undocumented changes to their IT systems that no one else knows about, and as many as 40 per cent of organisations don't have any formal IT change management controls.

Netwrix's, '2014 State of IT Changes' survey collected data from 577 IT professionals in organisations across multiple industries and a range of sizes. The survey found that 65 per cent of IT professionals have made changes that caused services to stop, 52 per cent

had made changes that affected system downtime daily or weekly and almost 40 per cent had made a change that was the root cause of a security breach.

The survey also found that 62 per cent of the respondents had little or no real ability to audit the changes they made, revealing serious gaps in meeting security best practice and compliance objectives, and only 23 per cent had an auditing process to validate changes being entered into a change management solution.

Grampian Housing goes virtual with Castle Computer Services & VMware



In order to replace an ageing server estate at Grampian Housing Association, Castle Computer Services has completed the implementation of 16 VMware virtual servers and its own Castle DataGuard backup and recovery service.

Grampian Housing's business growth and consequent demand for more complex IT services had resulted in a sprawling estate of around 10 servers, each at least three years old. The server room was very noisy and space was running out. Cooling was also an issue, with considerable heat being generated in the room.

To compound the situation, backup arrangements were time consuming and cumbersome. A full backup to tape for the entire server infrastructure would take around 18 hours, which was causing problems because the backup was still running when people came in the next morning.

Martin Laws, information systems manager, Grampian Housing Association, said, "We couldn't react as fast as we wanted to if there was a need for new software or system add-ons that required a new server. It would take about two to three weeks to get a server and find space for it. Therefore because of the lack of space and cooling problems, we began to shoehorn multiple applications onto a single server to

avoid adding another box.

"We wanted to significantly beef-up our disaster recovery. Because we were backing-up to tape and it was taking so long, if there was a staff request to restore a file, it would take ages to process. We had to get the tape from our off-site location, catalogue it, index it, find the file and provide it to the user. It could take days to do. If there was a disaster we were aware that backing up to tape would have really increased the time to restore significant amounts of data."

Castle was awarded preferred IT partner status as part of an earlier tendering exercise to support Grampian Housing's existing physical network structure. Laws said, "We knew Castle Computer Services was VMware- and Veeam-accredited. We were happy with how VMware worked on the couple of virtualised servers we already had. We considered several options but felt that it was best to standardise the infrastructure on VMware."

Grampian Housing has now reduced its server estate from ten servers to three physical servers supporting 16 virtual servers, and the reduction in physical hardware to power and cool in the data room has cut the energy costs by two-thirds. Laws said, "We can now commission and build a new server in less than a day, instead of

three weeks. To be able to react that quickly is a huge benefit."

Laws said, "We are about to complete the implementation of Castle's DataGuard, which was the second part of the project. We backup every night on our premises which is replicated to Castle's datacentres. Previous 18-hour backups to tape have been replaced by full backup to disk in less than three hours; it's good to get that email every morning to say that the backup was completed successfully and in just a few hours."

Following the implementation, Grampian Housing found that it now had plenty of disk space for storage on the new SAN so it is running shadow copies four times a day on the network for end-users. This means that if they delete standard Microsoft Office files at any time, the IT team can bring them back at any one of the four staging points.

Laws said, "Because of VMware, we can do hardware maintenance during working hours without the end-users noticing. So if there are any hardware upgrades on any of the hosts, we can use VMware's VMotion to move the servers to another host. Before, it would have taken a weekend or would have been an out-of-hours job. Our IT team naturally welcomes anything that reduces out-of-hours work!"

Risk management and technology in social housing

Sir – Risk comes in a number of categories within the social housing sector; it could be operational, financial, legal or even political risk.

For example, any housing provider owes a duty of care to its field workers to inform them of potential hazards they may come in contact with during their working day. This could be exposure to asbestos in a property or hazardous materials used on a building maintenance job.

Using mobile technologies, this risk can be directly and immediately highlighted to the operative on their handheld device before starting the work. Equally, protection can be given to the operative's personal safety by monitoring their location and enabling help to be given quickly if a dangerous situation occurs or even deliver pro-active management, such as advising and scheduling operatives to work in pairs because of a possible risk or an adverse risk assessment of the work.

Within housing providers' back office functions, IT can help to reduce financial risk, pro-actively warning of loss making jobs and contracts and pin pointing the cause of any issues. Ensuring that KPIs are properly managed and recorded helps manage the risk to the legal and political targets and ensures customer satisfaction remains high.

In summary, integrating asset management information with operational workflows, so that everyone involved in the process knows about the potential risks and how to deal with them, is a huge benefit in delivering good risk management.

Chris Potter
Director of Uniclass, ROCC

Big data, big issue

The big data revolution seems to be sweeping almost invisibly through business, academia, government, housing and everyday life. Defined as the collection, analysis, and visualisation of vast amounts of information, facilitated by clever algorithms, big data is seen by many as the biggest technology innovation since the birth of the internet.

A recent survey carried out by Mobysoft appears to confirm that housing providers also recognise the power of effective data analysis, with 100 per cent of respondents stating it will be very important or vital to their organisation in future.

Getting to know their tenants better, assessing the risk and anticipating behaviour were also cited as crucial in the wake of welfare reform and all of the above will undoubtedly be underpinned by intelligent data mining.

The more intelligence a housing provider can gather, the earlier they can intervene and support the tenants who need it most. In the wake of rising rent arrears, this must surely be a benefit to everyone involved.

Derek Steele,
Managing Director, Mobysoft

The noise of big data

Sir – All of the hype and references to big data are great as it gives us something new to talk about, but is it all that it's cracked up to be?

Sure, there is more data. Social media platforms create loads of data but so what? I've looked at Twitter and tried to make sense of tweets, work out sentiment and turn 140 characters of Twitter-speak into useful, insightful information. Facebook... you're having a laugh (a sponsored laugh these days).

We all get sucked in by the hype and the rhetoric.

Today is more about 'now'. Getting the information you need about your business, your customers, and your staff when you want it and without having to go to someone to get it.

I'm in the big data arena. We have software that is fundamentally geared around scale and performance, but it's not big data we are promoting, it's self-service and ease of use. In today's society, size is irrelevant... it's relevance that's relevant.

The old-fashioned data warehouse, staging areas, cubes and so on are no longer in vogue. Everything these days is 'search' for something and you'll find it in seconds. However, search is 'throw away the old' and do things in a completely different way.

Google has been revolutionary. Google is a gargantuan warehouse with the easiest to use interface you could possibly come up with...

Big data is a general realisation that there is so much more data than what you collect in your back-office systems that might be useful, but even with the likes of Hadoop to persist that information in an accessible repository, what is the true value of this data and how do we get that value?

I find the hype around big data and the promotion of technologies that require dozens of servers, armies of techies and even then professors of programming to get at the data a bit of a scam.

At the end of the day, it's about value for money, efficiency, customer satisfaction and self-improvement so it's not size that matters, it's being able to zero in on the facts and finding the information that matters.

Big data is noise. I am concentrating on finding out the facts and masking out the noise. But ever mindful that the noise might get louder, I'm equipping myself with the tools to adjust the volume when I need to.

Mark Hobart
Managing Director, Clearview Systems

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EDM at Port of Leith with Invu



Port of Leith Housing Association is mid-way through a project with Invu to digitise more than 50,000 documents, replacing its previous manual process of filing and storing all paper-based documents. The £32,000 project is expected to be completed this summer, and in doing so will free up significant amounts of storage space amounting to 30 metres of shelving and eight filing cabinets of documents.

The decision to move the organisation toward electronic document management was prompted by the need to have access to a mass of documents for efficient service delivery and meet regulatory standards.

Neil Donald, ICT manager, Port of Leith Housing Association, said, "With over 50,000 documents to maintain, it was vital for us to find a system that would make it easier for our staff to retrieve documents quickly. Thanks to the structure in the Invu electronic document management system, the increased control allows us to assign an owner or task to a document, complete with a full audit trail."

Once Invu's document management software has been integrated with the housing provider's existing business applications, staff will be able to manage the confirmation of instruction documents, valuation reports, gas certificates, tenancy agreements and post-management questionnaires without having to spend time searching through reams of documents in either physical cabinets or its Windows-based filing structure.

Donald added, "One of the good things about the Invu document management system is the integration with email. People just don't realise how much business-critical information is contained within their inboxes these days, and they feel inclined to just keep things there. The email add-on is a great feature for not only filing emails, but also attachments."



Enterprise search & BI from Clearview for Villages Housing



Villages Housing is implementing Clearview's enterprise search engine-based business intelligence and reporting suite in order to make sense of all the data it holds across disparate systems.

Villages recognised that the volume of data it held had increased significantly since the Capita IBS applications were installed in 2008. This growth of data has been generated throughout the core business systems, comprising IBS OpenHousing, OpenAccounts and SharePoint, and within its general Microsoft Office applications.

Ken Mason, corporate services director, Villages Housing, said, "While there has been some data sharing

between these systems, we need a comprehensive approach to the way data is shared and accessed across systems, ideally to ensure that all data can be commonly reported, combined, compared, consolidated and mined through a single tool or system. This will allow us to exploit a vast pool of data better and much more effectively inform current business activity and future service planning.

"Having looked at a number of management information systems, we felt Clearview stood out because of its ease of use and return on investment. The system is easy to navigate and can be compared to something as simple as doing a Google search."

Clearview will enable Villages' staff to create live performance dashboards and transform their existing monthly 'performance clinic' model into a more proactive performance monitoring environment; even board reports could be developed to be live and interactive in the future.

Mason added, "Clearview provides an opportunity for data cleansing, as data errors and gaps are more easily identified and therefore resolved. Ultimately this will lead to improved validation of Villages' data with consequential benefits for service quality and efficiency."

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Capita's electronic document management solutions have all the functionality we need; the level of integration with the housing system is the best on the market.

Chris Dreery, head of IT, Solihull Community Housing

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eShare launches new BoardPacks



eShare has released an updated version of its web- and app-based software for governance and meeting management.

The new BoardPacks upgrades eShare's current software with a fresh, intuitive design that makes meeting management easier. The accompanying apps for iOS and Windows tablets allow directors to work from anywhere, providing secure access to their meeting packs, documents, and information, as well as to their corporate SharePoint sites.

With seven out of 10 governance professionals believing technology

to be imperative or very important to good governance (according to eShare's recent survey), eShare has developed BoardPacks as more than just a meeting management solution; it also includes modules to manage procedures, risks, and decisions, helping to improve governance across the board.

Brian Moran, director of corporate services, Adactus Housing Group, said, "I used the notes feature during a board meeting and my minutes are now done. I hate writing minutes and usually put off typing up my notes until near the next meeting so this is a

fantastic improvement. So hats off to you all at eShare, I am very impressed with the thought that has gone into your product."

BoardPacks users get the opportunity to contribute to eShare's product development programme. As Tim Vaughan from RSA Group said, "Having seen the new BoardPacks for the first time, I was very impressed by its design, ease of use, and functionality. I look forward to its release and being able to start using it for my schemes."

Better performance at Radian

Radian has transformed its business performance in the past five years by improving the engagement levels of its employees. Through working with the market research company Orc International since 2009, the housing provider has demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and employee engagement, staff turnover and sickness absence.

Between 2010 and 2013, Radian boosted its employee engagement levels from 58 per cent to 80 per cent, with individual team scores up to 98 per cent. This has had significant knock-on effects throughout the business with sickness levels down

two points to three per cent and staff turnover reduced from 17 per cent to five per cent.

Radian's customer satisfaction has also improved, with consumers stating they now have increased trust in the organisation. They also believe Radian has a good reputation and that it acts and listens to their views.

Peter Wakefield, head of organisational development, Radian, said, "Orc's analysis of our engagement data really helps us to identify what's important and what's not. The research has given us information we simply wouldn't have

if we didn't measure our engagement levels.

"These results feed into our business plan and we now use employee engagement as a key performance indicator and as a prominent measure of how the business is doing. Without it we wouldn't have been able to prioritise so efficiently and progress as quickly as we have done. We have proven the link between employee engagement and business performance for the first time in the housing sector, and as a result, have completely transformed our business."

Housing 21's £15m partnership with CarelineUK and Cirrus



Housing 21 has signed a 10-year contract with a combined value of £15 million with Cirrus (£11m) and CarelineUK (£4m) for the supply, installation and maintenance of Housing 21's warden call and door entry systems, including a full new build programme, and emergency alarm monitoring for over 24,000 connections.

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Housing providers launch best practice portal



A new method of sharing expertise has been launched by Social Enterprise West Midlands, part of the Aspire Group. The new web portal is funded by 16 housing providers and will allow them to share best practice.

The portal will focus on five themes:

- Understanding – supplying the information housing providers need to get started with social enterprises;
- Buying – all housing providers need to know in order to buy from and do business with social enterprises;
- Doing – providing the knowledge necessary to partner with social enterprises and benefit from it;
- Enabling – providing access to social enterprise work and business opportunities;
- Finding – facilitating access to social enterprise specialists to provide support.

Melanie Mills, chief executive, Social Enterprise West Midlands, said, “There are some fantastic examples of great practice from across the UK, including First Ark in the North West, Walsall Housing Group and Trident in the West Midlands to Shepherds Bush Housing Group and Plymouth Community Homes in the South. We hope sharing the peer-to-peer learning will create even more social impact.”

Seed funding for the Social Enterprise and Housing Hub was provided by Amicus Horizon, Aspire, B3 Living, Bolton at Home, Cross Keys Homes, Festival Housing, Gedling, Knightstone Housing, National Housing Federation, Orbit, Placeshapers, Plymouth Community Homes, Severnside Housing, Sovereign Housing, Together Housing, Trident, Two Rivers Housing and Walsall Housing Group.

HomeSwapper – 25 per cent increase in mutual exchanges

An increasing number of tenants are using home-swapping services as a result of welfare reform, according to figures from Housing Partners, the company behind the HomeSwapper mutual exchange platform.

Figures from Housing Partners show that the number of tenants swapping using HomeSwapper has risen by a quarter since April 2013. The data also shows that there are almost 200,000 one- and two-bedroom social housing properties available through

HomeSwapper for those wanting to downsize.

Richard Blundell, CEO, Housing Partners, said, “The number of successful swaps has risen from 21,700 for the year ending in April 2013 to 27,200 at the same point this year. Despite reports of a lack of smaller social homes, we have noticed a consistently high number available through HomeSwapper. Of the 300,000 properties registered on the

site, there are 55,000 one-bedroom and 140,000 two-bedroom homes, so housing choice is there for people who need to move.

“We believe that housing providers should encourage their tenants to use mutual exchange services more. The benefits are clear for both sides; housing providers can make valuable cost savings by limiting void costs and rent arrears, while tenants can avoid paying for bedrooms they don’t use.”

Happy 20th birthday to SDS



SDS, the Surrey-based housing IT specialist, celebrated its 20th birthday at the National Housing Federation’s recent conference in Warwick with bunny ears, pink boas and fun photo booth that had the NHF’s delegates diving into the dressing up box after the conference dinner.



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

Promaster delivers a cost saving investment that will help you transform the way you work.

For a discussion on how we can help reduce your asset management costs contact us at info@in4systems.com or on 0118 989 0362

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