

**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY**

2015 CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

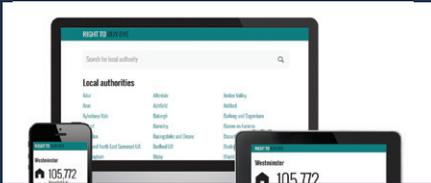
**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2015**

4-5 MARCH 2015  
Q HOTELS OXFORD BELFRY

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# HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

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## EDITORS NOTES

### MOBILE TRENDS FOR 2015

Housing Technology recently received some interesting insights from Trimble Field Service Management around the main trends for mobile working in 2015. These include:

- **Robust and flexible platforms:** housing providers are looking to mobile solution providers to deliver platforms across the organisation as the foundation for innovation. IT suppliers therefore have to be ready to add, extend and integrate technologies as needed, giving housing providers the ability to adapt and innovate. These platforms need to be cloud-based and flexible so that they can configure and manipulate modules and functionality as they see fit.
- **More security:** As the Internet of Things becomes more pervasive, there will be greater demand for advanced security applications. Security involves not only safeguarding network entry but also ensuring that every mobile device is fortified. That means equipping every tablet, smartphone and laptop with updated security tools and protocols, and educating users on the importance of adhering to security policies.
- **Embedded analytics:** Deploying mobile solutions with sophisticated analytics tools will enable managers to improve operations, service quality and overall performance with real-time visibility into their business using data gathered from smarter mobile apps and equipment sensors.
- **Greater integration:** As telematics and workforce management solutions become more integrated with mobile devices, the opportunities to increase efficiency and productivity are growing exponentially. Mobile apps can provide critical information such as daily tasks, rent and arrears information, tenant histories and the location of workers with specific skills in order to make better decisions, recruit help from other workers and complete more 'first-time fixes'.
- **The Internet of Everything:** By 2020, Gartner predicts that 26-billion devices, other than smartphones, tablets and computers, will be connected via the Internet of Things. Connecting IoT-enabled equipment with workers' mobile devices and back-office systems in real time will therefore become a necessity in order to provide diagnostics and performance metrics as well as to track patterns and trends for long-term planning.
- **Enhanced network reliability:** As housing providers adopt mobile solutions to improve their operations, they no longer can ignore the underlying IT infrastructure. Hybrid clouds, virtualised servers and scalable, high-capacity storage give e-networks the agility they need to stay flexible, efficient and productive; neglecting these areas can impact performance, impede productivity and escalate IT costs.
- **Evolving workforces:** According to Aberdeen Group, approximately 20 per cent of the current workforce is under 30 and have grown up fully connected. Almost two-thirds of the top performing field service organisations have incorporated a bring your own device (BYOD) strategy as a result of a more tech-savvy workforce, and 43 per cent are more likely to give staff access to social media and collaborative tools to facilitate knowledge transfer.

## EVENTS

**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2015**  
Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry, Oxfordshire  
4-5 March 2015  
[www.housing-technology.com/events/ht15](http://www.housing-technology.com/events/ht15)

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# WULVERN HOUSING REDUCES ARREARS WITH 1ST TOUCH

*Mobile workforce software from 1st Touch has enabled Wulvern Housing to reduce rent arrears by helping tenants deal with the challenges of welfare reform.*

Sasha Deepwell, deputy chief executive, Wulvern Housing, said, "We felt that unless the issues surrounding welfare reform were managed professionally, some of our tenants would find themselves under greater financial pressure and a consequent risk of increased arrears. We realised that we therefore needed to mobilise our services so that we could help our tenants more.

"While our call centre works very well in practice, we decided that the best thing to do was to get our incomes team out of the office, which would enable us to have more one-to-one personal contact with our tenants. As a result, our strategy was to mobilise our incomes officers and moving them to the front line."

Wulvern's approach was to re-organise its service into patch sizes of 250 homes, each with a neighbourhood officer, so that they got to know all the residents in their area. This allowed them to sit down with tenants and identify how best they could help. To do this, Wulvern chose 1st Touch's mobile software in order give its staff access to all the forms and data they needed when visiting tenants.

Deepwell said, "By using 1st Touch, our officers have up-to-date 'live' information when visiting tenants. As a result, 1st Touch has played a significant part in enabling our tenants to prosper by allowing us to get to them before financial pressures become a problem. This has not only helped us improve

our arrears performance but it has also improved our tenant satisfaction ratings."

Ian Rutherford, application developer and project manager, Wulvern Housing, said, "The mobile project was the result of a 'lean systems intervention', with the IT team effectively project managing and facilitating the introduction of mobile technology to enable neighbourhood officers to spend more time in the field with our tenants.

"Wulvern has a history of lean thinking and continuous improvement, based on Vanguard principles. This ensures that not only are projects handled professionally and efficiently but they are also designed to put tenants first and help them as much as possible. So initially, with the introduction of mobile technology, we wanted to look at the income management process as a whole, particularly in terms of ensuring our tenants pay the right amount of rent and pay it on time. Our analysis showed that the earlier an arrears case could be contacted, the more likely that case would be cleared.

"To achieve this, we needed a rapid application development platform that would link the mobile solution with our existing Aareon housing management system. 1st Touch software was chosen as it has existing integration with Aareon, is device-neutral, and has the support of a large company behind it."

The project was delivered in less than 10 weeks, from the first requirements meeting to the project's 'go live'. This included a rigorous testing programme, an upgrade to Aareon QL, and adding

the necessary server infrastructure to support the 1st Touch software. Rutherford said, "The speed with which we went live with 1st Touch was very impressive. Our staff found the application easy to use and quickly found their way around it, so we were able to quickly convert an office-based role into a mobile one."

Sasha Deepwell,  
Deputy Chief  
Executive, Wulvern  
Housing



Wulvern's neighbourhood officers now have all the information

they need at their fingertips, including rent and payment histories and past arrears activities. They can also take payments and capture data to set up or amend direct debits. All of this is then updated into the Aareon housing management system. In addition, neighbourhood officers can also draw up individual financial plans electronically when visiting tenants.

Rutherford said, "Our arrears fell from almost four per cent in September 2013 to just over three per cent in April 2014. There are other benefits too, such as increased efficiency as shown by an increase in tenant visits of 15 per cent. One interesting comment from a neighbourhood officer was that tenants seem to take more notice of rent balances when they are presented to them on the neighbourhood officer's iPad."

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## SPECTRUM HOUSING GROUP SAVES £50,000 A YEAR WITH ADVANCED'S MOBILEHR

*Spectrum Housing Group is saving over £50,000 each year and improving employee engagement using MobileHR, a mobile HR system from Advanced Business Solutions.*



MobileHR allows Spectrum's staff to submit expenses, holiday requests and declare business hospitality gifts via their smartphone and tablet devices, allowing the HR team to focus on more value-adding activities. Line managers can also use the system to record all sickness absence types and approve processes remotely without needing to go into the office.

The system is integrated with Advanced's OpenHR human resource system, which manages all HR information relating to Spectrum's 900 staff in nine UK offices. OpenHR's self-service, training and recruitment modules have already streamlined the housing provider's administrative processes by helping the HR department to track absences, deliver health and safety

information and identify internal skills gaps more efficiently through greater automation.

Robert Barnett-Moore, HR systems manager, Spectrum Housing Group, said, "MobileHR has eliminated the need for trade staff to come into the office to manage holiday requests and other administrative tasks. In addition, holiday and sickness absence records are now automatically updated remotely by authorised staff. We are now saving around £50,000 each year in fuel and efficiency gains which has given us an instant return on our investment."

Robert Barnett-Moore, HR Systems Manager, Spectrum Housing Group



The solution has also enabled Spectrum to increase employee engagement through its internal staff recognition scheme, Spectrum Stars. Using their mobile devices, staff can quickly and easily nominate individual employees, managers or teams to receive internal recognition and annual awards for their contributions.

The process is managed using an intuitive workflow which routes all submissions to the HR department and automatically alerts staff by email when they have been nominated. So far, almost 3,000 nominations have been made since the scheme's launch in 2012.

Barnett-Moore comments, "We wanted to improve our levels of employee engagement and Spectrum Stars, with the aid of MobileHR, is supporting our goal to be named as one of 'The Best 100 Companies to Work For' in The Sunday Times' annual survey.

"In the last two months alone, we have seen a 70 per cent increase in staff nominations for our 2015 scheme, partly because Advanced's solution is so easy and quick to use."

## SOVEREIGN'S WORKERS NEVER ALONE WITH CONNEXION2

*More than 550 employees at Sovereign Housing Association are now using Connexion2's Identicom Series 8 devices and SoloProtect service for lone working.*

Discreetly packaged in the form of an identity badge, the Identicom devices allow workers to activate a 'red alert' (with 24/7 audio link to an alarm receiving centre) if they are at risk of verbal abuse, physical attack or a slip, trip or fall. Through GSM technology, ARC staff can monitor and listen into a situation, escalating direct to the emergency services if necessary. GPS technology fitted into the device can also help locate lone workers.

Dave Brown, anti-social behaviour officer, Sovereign Housing Association, said, "I spend a lot of time out of the office working on my own, visiting residents and sometimes dealing with difficult issues. Although I don't always feel at risk, I appreciate that there are dangers that are part of dealing with the diverse range of situations and people that I come across."

Commenting on a recent occasion where he did have to raise a genuine 'red alert', Brown said, "I felt totally at ease and have total trust in the system. I particularly like the fact that, if you feel that a situation may be at all uncomfortable or confrontational, you can raise a 'red alert', give the

advisor a brief description of the issues, and then have the reassurance of that advisor listening in on the subsequent conversation and situation that you are facing."



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Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch

# EMPOWERING YOUR CUSTOMERS

*By introducing customer self-service technology, housing providers can transform their cost structures and also meet their social, financial and digital inclusion strategies. Such systems can also significantly boost customer engagement. Robert Dent, CEO of 1st Touch, outlines how introducing effective self-service systems can also help re-focus essential resources to combat the challenges posed by welfare reform.*

Whether you work for a housing provider or work for a technology supplier like 1st Touch, there is a common aim: to improve service delivery levels to the residents and tenants that make up a housing provider's customer base. Predominantly, the pursuit of this goal involves using mobile workforce technology wisely to mobilise a wide range of business functions from repairs, estate management, gas and voids through to, more recently, neighbourhood teams and income officers. Alternatively, this has also meant equipping call-centre staff with the right telephony technology to handle incoming calls about a similarly wide range of issues. Both these technologies are usually seamlessly integrated into the housing provider's back-office housing management or CRM systems. Both are also extremely sound and deliver significant productivity benefits and efficiency savings. They also allow field-based staff to have greater one-to-one contact with tenants in their homes.

However, when one conducts analyses on the requirements in detail, there is one other significant but all too often under-utilised asset that can both transform customer services and allow vital resources to be refocused elsewhere. This asset is of course the customer base itself. Here, to maximise the impact of this important resource, housing providers need to invest in customer self-service apps, by deploying systems that empower their customers to report and manage a wide range of requests themselves either through online or mobile technologies. When deploying such systems, one has to be

extremely careful to do this correctly by fully understanding a housing provider's specific social, technical and financial inclusion requirements and strategies. For example, when it came to developing our own self-service system, we were careful to enlist the excellent advice of social housing experts such as those at Halton Housing to make sure that we understood fully what was needed.

By listening to critical but positive feedback and input, one very soon understands that to be effective, the introduction of a customer self-service system has to incorporate an ability to update information in real time to the social landlord's back-office systems. The app also needs to be accessible 24/7/365, not just during office hours. It also needs to enable customers to use the technology they are familiar with to access it. This means that they can access it not just from their PCs, but also via their mobile devices.

There is an ever-growing list of services that can be accessed in this way. They can, for example, report anti-social behaviour or estate issues such as graffiti or fly-tipping and they can support this by sending in their own photographic evidence. Customers can also order responsive repair requests, a gas service, or even report a gas leak.

If they need to check their rent balance or to make a payment, this too is now possible online as is requesting a house move or a transfer. Self-service apps also provide a great opportunity for feedback and suggestions.

These systems build trust over time with customers, so it's important to ensure that they contain a considerable amount of supporting information and all the forms that customers might need to use. This enables the customer to access and review all the relevant information they might need online and then to simply enter their details. The system then logs the contact in the housing provider's CRM or housing management system which in turn kicks off the appropriate workflow to the relevant

person or contractor in, for example, the responsive repairs or gas service team. The system will then promptly send an acknowledgement to the customer that the query is being dealt with. In the case of repairs, gas or estate inspections the system can be set up to confirm possible dates for action with the customer while they are online. Ultimately, this will also lead to a text, call or an email to confirm that the right operative is on their way. All the information entered by customers should then be automatically updated on the housing provider's back-office system in real time.

The main driver for introducing customer self-service apps is to free up significant resources that can either be saved or re-directed to deliver additional support to the housing provider's most vulnerable customers. A persuasive way of illustrating this point and therein quantifying the significance of this is to look at the transactional costs.

Our research shows that every call with a customer typically costs £5 whereas every face-to-face meeting has a typical transaction cost of £15. However, an online interaction is always less than £1. As there are likely to be tens of thousands of transactions each year, one can see that the amount of resources that could be saved or re-focused could easily run into millions of pounds.

In effect, customer self-service systems not only transform what housing providers do but they can also add a whole new positive dimension to the customer experience and engagement that they deliver.

The adoption of such systems is a win-win situation and we can see that using this technology to empower customers will soon become a matter of widespread best practice. What is particularly reassuring is that the ultimate beneficiaries of this new technology will be the housing provider's residents and tenants themselves.

*Robert Dent is CEO of 1st Touch.*

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## GUARDIAN24 LAUNCHES KEY FOB ALARM FOR LONE WORKERS

*Guardian24 has launched MicroGuard, a key-fob sized device that combines the latest GPS, GPRS and G-sensor technologies to provide lone workers with an easy-to-use, highly-effective means to call for help at the touch of a button.*

Certified to the British Standard for lone-worker device services (BS 8484), the MicroGuard connects to Guardian24's dedicated UK alarm receiving centre (ARC). Trained ARC controllers will determine the nature of the situation through GPS tracking and remote two-way audio streaming. In addition to the SOS button, MicroGuard features a fall alarm which will automatically raise an alert to the ARC in the event of a fall or sudden impact.

The MicroGuard devices also allow users to leave specific pre-alert voice messages, providing details of their activity and location. These voice messages will be immediately available to the ARC controllers if an alarm is activated, providing vital additional information which can be passed to the emergency responder.

The devices have a battery life of over 200 hours and can be worn as a pendant, attached to a key-ring or belt, or worn as an identity cardholder using an accessory.

Leona Mills, marketing manager, Guardian24, said, "We uniquely allow each end-user to have the Guardian24 service available to them on two devices

simultaneously in recognition of the growing trend to have both a work and personal mobile phone.

"Adding the MicroGuard to our product portfolio allows us to offer a compact lone-worker device that can be used in addition to our smartphone app, providing the user with 24/7 protection for just a single subscription fee."

### GUARDIAN24 REGISTERS ITS ONE MILLIONTH LONE-WORKER ACTIVITY

Guardian24 has reported that it has registered its one millionth lone worker activity for 2014.

The one millionth activity was logged on 4th November 2014 by Linda Murray, a Befriending Volunteer with The Alzheimer's Society in the Wirral. To celebrate this achievement, Guardian24 donated £200 to The Alzheimer's Society.

Linda from The Alzheimer's Society said, "Our lone-working staff use Guardian24 as their personal safety solution to safeguard themselves while working alone in the community. By logging our lone worker activities, we can carry out our work with confidence knowing that should our safety be compromised, help will be on hand."



## Footprint launches new mobile app

*Footprint Solutions is about to launch a new mobile app in March to extend the reach of its Housing Support Pro service.*

The Housing Support Pro app will provide mobile workers and their management teams with access to business-critical information while in the field. Footprint said that it expected the app would transform the way in which housing providers engage with their tenants, removing the siloed approach to service provision by providing real-time information and generating service requests for tenants in an instant.

Glyn Cunnah, head of housing sales, Footprint Solutions, said, "There are three distinct elements to the new app. First, it is completely vendor-neutral so it will sit alongside any core housing management system. Secondly, customer and account information will be available offline to enable continuous working without a mobile signal, and finally the forms can be generated from the app with pre-populated data, saving time and resources for remote workers."

John Sant, chief executive, Footprint Solutions, said, "Before launching our Housing Support Pro web-service in June 2014, it was clear that one problem was that most housing management solutions are large-scale, complex systems which are generally poor at providing mobile workers with information on the move.

We therefore designed our solution to sit alongside these larger systems, providing critical information to ensure high standards of service."

The web-based Housing Support Pro solution was originally implemented at Golden Gates Housing Trust in May 2014 and has since provided the organisation with a powerful community engagement strategy and delivered significant savings.

Peter Fitzhenry, director of housing, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said, "The reason the Footprint system has received such high levels of interest from housing providers is due to the significant time and efficiency savings that we have achieved here. We have reduced paper usage by almost 50 per cent and saved over £500,000 in the first year. Not only has this meant that the solution is cost-effective to run, but it has also delivered a 400 per cent return on investment.

"The housing sector has been subject to considerable reform over the past 24 months and we feel that, in certain areas such as mobile working, the larger IT providers have struggled to keep up with the demands placed upon our organisation. Footprint has allowed us to transform our services and we look forward to implementing the app in the early part of 2015."





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## CARDIFF COMMUNITY HOUSING USES RAM FOR SORP COMPLIANCE

*Real Asset Management has been helping Cardiff Community Housing Association with its compliance with continually-evolving SORP regulations and component accounting.*

When the SORP regulations initially changed in 2010, CCHA was using Open Accounts combined with Excel spreadsheets to keep track of its assets. Not only was this time-consuming, it was susceptible to human error as well.

Paul Westwood, fixed asset accountant, Cardiff Community Housing Association, said, "We had to decide how we could manage our data better and keep it secure. We decided that a fully-automated system would not only be far easier to use, but it would give us a more detailed audit trail of all our assets and help us with component accounting."

CCHA reviewed a number of asset management systems, including combined finance and asset packages and Open Accounts' own fixed asset module. In the end, the housing provider chose Real Asset Management's Asset4000 systems for its flexibility, ease of use, depth of functionality and integration with most accounting systems, including Open Accounts.



Westwood said, "Asset4000 has extensive component accounting functionality and quickly provides us with the data we require. It also

enables us to have a clear audit trail so if mistakes are made we can trace them, fix them and put in place procedures to prevent them from recurring.



"Real Asset Management has made our asset management process both seamless and reliable, while saving us considerable time. We are now confident that our data is 100 per cent accurate and that we continue to comply with all SORP regulations, including SORP 2014 and the forthcoming FRS 102."

CCHA has also implemented Real Asset Management's Forecast4000 system which uses the data from Asset4000 for acquisition and disposal projections to enable it to calculate depreciation for any point in the future.

Westwood said, "We have really benefited from the real-time aspect of Asset4000 which provides us with information when we need it. And with Forecast4000, we can plan capital programmes without affecting the base data.

"You can theoretically do the same thing with a spreadsheet but it would be very time-consuming and complicated. Forecast4000 makes this process a lot simpler and we can easily separate data to consider options for specific asset categories and budgets."

## CAPITA LEADS UK'S FIRST INTEGRATION OF VERIFONE UX PAYMENTS WITH SECURE RETAIL

*Capita's software services business has reported that it is the first company in the UK to receive accreditation to use the latest generation of unattended payment terminals from VeriFone and Secure Retail within its customers' self-service kiosks.*

Housing providers and local authorities can now access the most up-to-date system to take kiosk payments across their networks while remaining within the scope of the evolving PCI-DSS compliance guidelines.

David Russell, sales director, Secure Retail, said, "Because the PCI-DSS standard constantly develops, it is imperative that companies follow suit and use the latest technology to keep customers' details safe. Our partnership with VeriFone means that Capita can provide a stable and future-proof payments system across its customer base, enabling them in turn to provide a first-rate service to end-users."

The UX 100 keypad has the latest PCI 3.X security certification and meets EMV level 2 certification when connected to the UX 300 card reader. It supports a secured link to the UX 300 to guarantee security around message display, PIN and keyboard entry.





# DON'T FEAR THE REAPER: EASIER RENT COLLECTION WITH IT

John Doyle, Managing Director, The Housing Contact Company

*As we start another new year, I would like to present you with a very old, hoary chestnut for your edification: time is money. As I said, not too much original thought required for that one.*

However, as we venture forth into the potential eye of the universal credit storm and the inevitable impact it will have on the level of arrears for every housing provider, regardless of how deep some will have their heads buried in the sand, it is worth revisiting this adage. Time, or perhaps more specifically delay, has always been an issue when it comes to collecting revenue. Whether you are a housing provider or pretty much any other kind of enterprise, getting your money in on time is critical to survival. The concept of cash flow and its importance is hard-wired into the culture of every small- to medium-sized enterprise. Unfortunately within the social housing sector, it remains largely an alien concept. I predict that a fuller roll out of universal credit in 2015 will change that.

Another pearl of wisdom: diagnosis is better than cure. This is another way of saying that it is better to be proactive than reactive. Now, it is not my intention to use this article as statement of the most obvious business clichés of the last 50 years, so please bear with me.

## Speed of serve

Most income collection in the housing sector is predominantly reactive. By its very definition, that means it is subject to delay. Even Andy Murray's reaction is subject to delay when returning a serve (apparently about 0.7 seconds), but a delayed reaction nonetheless. It is fair to say that the housing sector's average reaction time to rent arrears is a bit longer than that. It is also fair to say that there is a direct relationship between the length of that delayed reaction time and the ultimate cost and ongoing level of rent arrears. It's not like fine wine; it doesn't improve with age.

The type of arrears where the damaging effect of delayed reaction is best brought into focus for most housing

providers is former tenant arrears (FTA). Chasing current arrears is a hard enough challenge, but at least there is the usual leverage that the tenant does actually want to stay in the house. With FTA, that leverage is gone and quite often so is the tenant before anything has been done to collect the outstanding debt. Many times, hand-in-hand with FTA, go 'chargeable repairs', or rather repairs that should have been charged for, but usually just get added to the list of non-collectables. Consider your own organisation and the amount of resource that is deployed to collect current arrears and compare that with the amount of time, effort and personnel applied to chasing FTA. This lower priority approach results in a greater delay in contacting the individual tenants, when ironically this is the type of arrears that requires the fastest reaction times.

## Good vs. bad payers

So where does all this leave the typical housing provider in the face of universal credit and the notion of being proactive? Well, if we start by considering the fact that as a sector, on average 70 per cent of tenants have historically had all or some of their rent paid for them directly via housing benefit. This leads to the frightening conclusion that the majority of the sector's existing rent arrears balances are in fact attributable to their top 30 per cent of paying customers. That may be seen by some as an overstatement of the potential problem presented to housing providers by universal credit, but even allowing for a degree of exaggeration, it does provide some perspective. So, short of a government U-turn on welfare reform and a return to the housing benefit system, which many will be hoping for in the forthcoming general election but is very unlikely to happen regardless of the result, what can be done?

Well, we need to come back to the idea of being proactive and how that can be done practically with regards to rent collections. I use the term 'practically' because I have witnessed more than the odd impractical suggestion. Most of

those suggestions have tended to be around the idea of simply throwing more people at the problem. In a magazine supplement last year, there were a number of large housing providers lamenting the extra cost of overtime or additional personnel required simply to maintain previous levels of arrears. I recently met with one Scottish landlord whose CEO has insisted that it is everyone's duty within the organisation to chase outstanding arrears, whenever they have any time to do so.

While I sympathise with his sentiment and applaud his understanding of the importance of the issue, it is hardly a practical solution to have everyone in the organisation trying to do what is, after all, a potentially complex task. The suggestion of more 'feet on the street' and getting back to some notion of the 'good old ways' is simply redundant thinking. The acid test should simply be that when the cost of collecting an extra pound is more than a pound, then it isn't worth collecting. I could cite that as the third obvious truism in this piece, if it wasn't for the fact that many in this sector prefer to ignore it.

## Faster collection processes

The answer then must be technology and not any kind of technology, just those that make the collection process quicker. In the current world order where people remain on housing benefit and payments are still being made direct by the government, that means understanding when a case of actual, as opposed to technical, arrears arises and acting on it immediately to establish contact with the tenant.

As most rent is paid weekly, or not in this case, that means speaking to them within five days. Any delay beyond that has typically just doubled the size of the problem. With FTA, there is a compelling argument that if you don't speak to the ex-tenant within two weeks of them leaving, you are likely to be writing off most, if not all, of that debt.

*Continued overleaf*

## DON'T FEAR THE REAPER: EASIER RENT COLLECTION WITH IT

*Continued from overleaf*

In the new world order of universal credit, the challenge will be to contact tenants before they get the chance to fall into arrears by reminding them that their rent needs to be paid as a priority. Delays in that process could mean they have spent their 'rent money' elsewhere.

Any technology that notifies you faster of actual or potential arrears should be investigated. Access to the latest account status for your key housing and rent officers when they manage to talk to tenants with arrears issues, whether that's at their desk or via a mobile device in the field, is also worth the investment. Finally,

the ability to automate contact with your tenants to send the right message at the right time will help accelerate your reaction times and improve your overall collections performance.

*John Doyle is the managing director of The Housing Contact Company.*



## SOFTWARE ASSET MANAGEMENT – IT'S TIME FOR CHANGE

Sean Robinson, Software Asset Management Expert, Phoenix Software

*The cornerstone of any software asset management (SAM) programme is good quality and up-to-date data from both inventory and procurement perspectives; this forms the basis of your effective licence position (ELP), a key milestone in any SAM programme.*

However, the problem is that getting to this point can be extremely time-consuming and those responsible can become bogged down by transactional tasks, leaving little time to evaluate the intelligence gained and take action before it's time to repeat the whole exercise all over again.

Very few organisations have the fire power to complete these transactional tasks in-house and then make time to implement policies, processes and optimisation exercises based on that data; these are essentially what makes a SAM programme successful.

### Defining transactional tasks

To help quantify what is meant by transactional tasks, here is a summary:

- Combining and normalising inventory data from multiple sources;
- Consolidating and identifying an organisation's true licence entitlement;
- Piecing together historic software purchase information;
- Creating and managing a centralised view of an organisation's maintenance renewals;
- Reconciling your software installations and usage against your entitlements;
- Managing the compliance of an

organisation's virtual environment;

- Creating detailed management reports, including an organisation's ELP;
- Managing an in-house SAM system;
- System upgrades;
- Licence modelling.

### What SAM & IT teams could be doing...

If you imagine that the transactional tasks outlined above are all completed and you have access to a wealth of in-depth reporting and intelligence, you could then spend your time on strategic thinking, implementing proactive change and other priorities which could save your organisation money and make your departments more effective.

Here are some examples of what you could be doing instead:

- Saving your organisation money on its software spending by negotiating new software contracts and agreements, re-harvesting unused licences, and optimising the allocation of current entitlements;
- Completing projected licence-modelling exercises for internal projects and to meet organisational growth;
- Identifying, implementing and managing software processes and policies around software requests, procurement of licences, deployment of software, and end-of-life and technology refreshes.

### Licence-management-as-a-Service

Licence-management-as-a-Service (LMaaS) allows you to pass all your transactional licence management tasks to an experienced team. It takes

away the laborious and time-consuming process and provides all of the licence management reports and intelligence you need to make informed decisions and deliver a truly effective SAM programme.

Compared with choosing an on-premise solution which you manage and use yourself, supporting a service is simple. With business stakeholders accessing reports securely through the cloud and because the technology used to deliver the service is maintained in a controlled environment, there would be no upgrade requirements and the diagnosis and resolution of issues becomes more efficient.

Referring to Orbit Group's LMaaS contract with us, the housing provider's technical services manager, Roy Evans, said, "We not only have the peace of mind that every single software licence is diligently recorded and accurately assigned to a piece of hardware should we ever be audited, but also that every pound spent on software is properly scrutinised before being approved. We now have complete control over our software spend without having to lift a finger, which leaves us free to add value to other areas of the business."

All-in-all, by moving to LMaaS, you will save time and money, improve cost efficiency, be audit-ready faster and free-up your SAM and IT teams to do more exciting, more valuable activities.

*Sean Robinson is an LMaaS and SAM expert at Phoenix Software.*

# Mobile asset management from In4systems

*In4systems is launching a new mobile version of its Promaster asset management solution, developed in consultation with Longhurst Group, Magenta Living and other In4systems housing customers.*

The company reported that it had adopted a new approach to the design of the new mobile product, based on user-centred design (UCD) processes to gain a comprehensive view and understanding of end-users' requirements and how they work in the field.

John Buckland, director, In4systems, said, "Through working with customers, this exercise has provided great insights into the challenges that users face in their day to day roles, alongside helping to ensure that Promaster Mobile is

suitable for a variety of tasks and different environments."

In4systems observed some of its housing customers' surveyors in the field and received their feedback when testing the prototype interfaces. These insights were applied to the design of Promaster Mobile, resulting in the development of a simpler, intuitive and more user-centric mobile solution.

Scott Lewis, asset programme surveyor, Magenta Living, said, "For me, the interface was easy to use and didn't take long to become familiar. The interaction, process flow and accessibility of different elements was quite simple and enabled useful data input and storage via the stylus. The prototype offered a tangible insight into the design concept and user interface of the mobile application."

One of the key objectives of the project was to ensure that the new mobile solution wasn't merely a direct replication of the existing solution. It has been designed to work across different platforms (Android, iOS and Microsoft) and is capable of working offline in areas where there is little or no mobile signal coverage.

Gavin Black, senior project manager for business improvement, Longhurst Group, said, "The design and development of Promaster Mobile 4 has been a refreshing approach to software development. From the early stages of requirements gathering, to the user experience sessions and beta testing, the project has focused on the needs of surveyors and asset managers as the key stakeholders."

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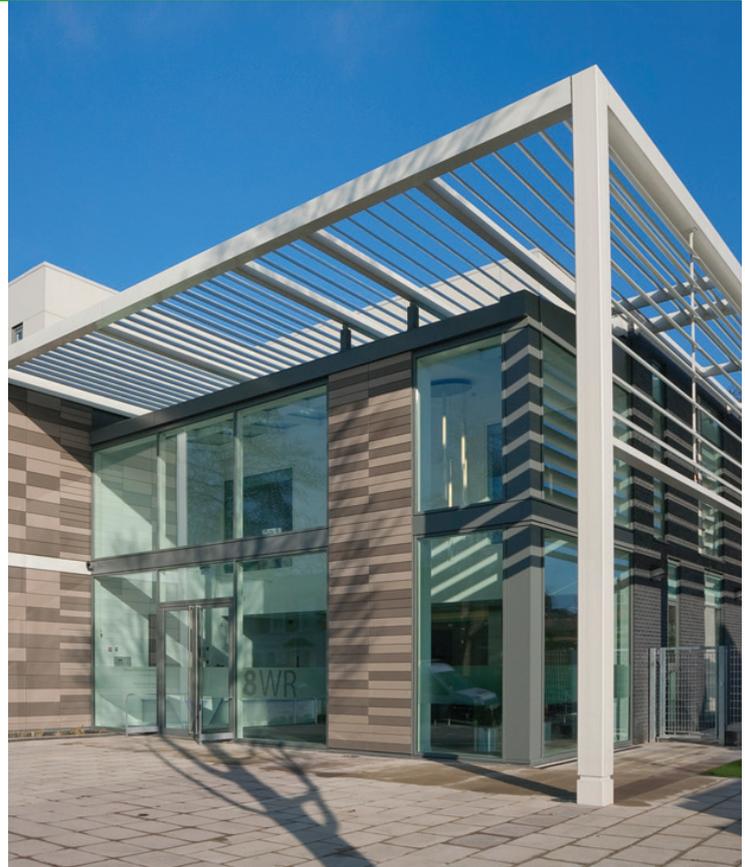
## RHP transforms services with Advanced ConsultCRM

*Richmond Housing Partnership has transformed its customer service levels by implementing a CRM solution from Advanced ConsultCRM. Microsoft Dynamics CRM is now being used to provide same-day response levels to more than 400 payment and maintenance queries handled by RHP's 60 customer support staff every week.*

Microsoft Dynamics CRM was rolled out at first to front-line customer support staff by Advanced ConsultCRM. A second phase, involving integration with RHP's back-office systems, has also now been completed. The solution is accessible to maintenance, asset management and retirement housing staff and provides consistent tenant information to make it easier and quicker to deal with tenants' enquiries.

Jonathan Creaser, head of ICT, Richmond Housing Partnership, said, "We are dedicated to providing exceptionally high levels of customer service. We benchmark ourselves against the non-food CSI index and Dynamics CRM has been instrumental in helping us exceed previous standards and set challenging new targets."

The system is integrated with RHP's website and enables tenants to access information relating to them and their property, make changes to their account and view updates provided by RHP's support teams. The adoption of these self-service web channels has consequently relieved the pressure on contact centre staff who now have more time to resolve more complex tenant issues. Dynamics CRM includes sophisticated business intelligence functionality which gives RHP's management team visibility of every aspect of their operations, making it easier to meet service-level targets and make better-informed decisions. The system also includes workflow features that enable reports to be tailored to each manager's needs.



Creaser said, "Dynamics CRM's reporting functionality has made it easy to monitor performance across all teams and really drive our customer service levels. We can identify any possible gaps and make sure these are plugged as quickly as possible."

## OPTEVIA AND DYNAMICS CRM AT TOWN & COUNTRY HOUSING



*Town & Country Housing Group has chosen CRM specialist Optevia to implement Microsoft's Dynamics CRM software alongside Optevia's own Social Housing Essentials to improve the quality of its interactions with tenants.*

Dynamics CRM from Optevia is expected to increase tenant satisfaction and enable Town & Country Housing's front-line staff to resolve 80 per cent of tenant enquiries at the first point of contact, thereby reducing the contact centre's call transfer rate by 20 per cent. Dynamics CRM and Optevia Social Housing Essentials are then expected to be rolled out to support self-service across mobile and the web, helping to reduce the volume of in-bound calls.

Jamie Barker, project manager, Town & Country Housing Group, said, "Our current system focuses on properties, not the tenants. We want to reverse that relationship so that everything we do is about our tenants. At the moment,

tenants are often passed between departments across different processes and systems, and this can cause bottlenecks and delays in dealing with customer enquiries. There is also a lack of data consistency and integration resulting in variable approaches regarding how we deal with procedures and enquiries.

"Dynamics CRM from Optevia will help us address that by putting our tenants at the heart of everything we do. Dynamics CRM will provide a more joined-up, proactive service because it will collect, sort and integrate all tenant data to provide a complete, single and accurate view of each tenant to ensure consistent end-to-end service delivery."

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## NEW CHARTER WINS CRM AWARDS WITH BANCTEC

*New Charter Group won the Contact Centre of the Year and Best Use of Technology awards at the recent annual North-West Contact Centre Awards, based on the housing provider's implementation of BancTec's CaseVision CRM system.*

Designed for managing high volume, complex business processes, CaseVision enables New Charter to resolve tenant enquiries more effectively and achieve higher rates for 'first-time fixes'. The

system captures information from multiple channels and sources, including telephony, mobile and electronic documents, as well as providing access to tenant data from other parts of the business.

The housing provider's customer service staff can now get an immediate view of the complete history of every tenant, and the integration between CaseVision and New Charter's existing housing management system means

that they can do so without needing to input the same information again.

Christine Amyes, executive director of people, New Charter Group, said, "The contact that we have with our tenants is very important to us, so to be voted the best contact centre in the North West reflects our emphasis on delivering a great service. The development of our CRM system with BancTec has played a key part in making this achievement possible."

For New Charter's wider business operations, the introduction of CaseVision is part of a two-year change programme for its front-line customer services. This programme, including the creation of a single contact centre product called 'Connect', has led to significant reductions in call volumes and improvements in tenant satisfaction with telephone services.

## FIVE INTO ONE AT TOGETHER HOUSING WITH MPLSYSTEMS

*Together Housing Group, which handles over 38,000 calls a month, has successfully migrated the telephony platforms of its five constituent housing organisations onto a single system from Mplsystems.*

After the group's formation in 2011 to join five separate housing associations, it found that the various customer service centres were all using different telephony platforms, with some centres having up to 15 different phone numbers for customer service enquiries. This made it very difficult for the group as a whole to deliver consistent levels of customer service. Together Housing therefore decided to aim for a 'one call for all' service offering.

Working with Together Housing's team, Mplsystems has designed a contact centre solution that brings together all calls from the multiple housing brands within the group into one secure system. Although currently operating on an East/West basis, the system allows for the possibility of the five regional contact centres to work as one virtual team, with calls being intelligently routed from one call centre to another, enabling them to effectively share resources and significantly improve productivity.

With the implementation of an intelligent desktop, the customer service team

can now resolve customer enquiries regardless of the housing association involved, while maintaining the local identity of each association. The agent's desktop identifies the customer as soon as the call is connected and presents their data on a single user interface, allowing the agent to deal with the call more efficiently.



Stephen Batley, group head of customer services, Together Housing Group, said, "Each of the housing providers was operating separate telephony systems, which was clearly not suitable if we were to realise the benefits of a group structure. Mplsystems' IntelligentContact has allowed us to achieve this, while ensuring that we can maintain the local identity of each individual association.

"The system from Mplsystems has also ensured that we are connecting the customer to the most skilled agent using intelligent skills-based routing. This was important because in the past agents specialised in certain areas such as repairs or lettings, so we can now maximise their knowledge in a more productive way across the group."

The new systems also gives customers a call-back option; once their enquiry reaches the front of the queue, an agent will call them back, avoiding the need for customers to spend a long time on hold. The call-backs are usually within 15 minutes and subsequently over-exceed customer expectations.

Batley said, "Mplsystems' solution has played a big part in helping us transform the service we deliver through our customer service centres. We can now work as a group, rather than as separate organisations, benefiting both us and our customers."

The next phase of Together Housing's project is to integrate email, social media and web chat into Mplsystems' IntelligentContact to provide an omni-channel customer experience.

# 'Speed-dating' with Looking Local



*A new 'speed-dating' platform, that connects tenants who want to let out a room in their property with individuals looking for a room to rent, has been unveiled by Kirklees Council-owned technology developer, Looking Local. The system is designed to remove costly and time-consuming customer contact from local authorities and housing providers, while helping public-sector housing tenants to pay their rent.*

RentARoom is the latest addition to Looking Local's LetsHelpYou multi-channel solution which takes councils out of the equation in finding housing association accommodation for potential tenants. And, thanks to an integrated local housing allowance calculator, it is at a rent they know they can afford.

The push to encourage people looking to rent towards self-service, digital solutions as they search for accommodation they can afford is being pioneered by Looking Local, and LetsHelpYou is designed to help potential tenants explore the available options using devices that are most convenient to them.

With its development part-funded by the Department for Work and Pensions to help smooth the transition to universal credit and the local housing allowance, LetsHelpYou is accessible across a range of devices, including interactive TV (through Sky and Virgin) and smartphone apps, as well as on the web.

The creation of RentARoom was prompted by the Government initiative that promotes tax breaks for property owners and housing association tenants who let out a furnished room or an entire floor of their home.

LetsHelpYou has been used by more than 2,300 landlords and around 35,000 tenants since it was successfully piloted by five local authorities in West Yorkshire in 2012. The pilot indicated that properties stand vacant for shorter periods and, because tenants are steered towards properties they can afford, eviction rates fall.

Guy Giles, programme director, Looking Local, said, "The RentARoom function of our LetsHelpYou platform extends our multi-channel solution to a new group of accommodation providers – people who want to rent out part of their home. By removing intermediaries, it offers a more streamlined service, putting customers directly in contact with providers, saving time and money for hosts, lodgers and housing and advice agencies, such as local authorities."



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# PREVIEW HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2015

**HOUSING  
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*With around six weeks to go, at the time of writing, until the Housing Technology 2015 conference and executive forum (4-5 March, Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry), we can give you a preview of all the presentations, keynote speeches, sponsors and exhibitors.*

Housing Technology 2015, our sixth annual conference and executive forum, is now widely regarded as the leading event for senior IT influencers and decision-makers within the UK social housing sector. The annual event returns to the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry on 4-5 March 2015, with a pre-event evening reception on 3 March 2015. There is also an informal dinner for all delegates, speakers, sponsors and exhibitors on the evening of 4 March.

## TECHNOLOGY & BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS

### 1st Touch: Delivering the 'smart' home - Greg Johns.

An insight into the technology roadmap for housing providers that looks at past, present and future technologies as they move towards the 'smart' home. Greg Johns will discuss how technology will evolve over the next five years to deliver the smart home and what this will mean for housing providers and tenants, from how it will save money for both to how it will transform service delivery.

### AAREON: istay@home: Using technology to help the ageing population - Stephen Makin.

It is estimated that Europe's population of people over 65 years of age will increase from 17 per cent to 30 per cent. This will present economic, social and health-related issues for all EU countries. This issue is also making the agenda within the UK housing sector, because as people live longer, care and

support needs will increase.

### ADACTUS HOUSING: Social housing 2.0: what does it look like? - Paul Lees.

In less than a decade, 'web 2.0' fundamentally disrupted and changed the game in the retail sector forever. Are there new technology trends now that have the potential to have the same impact on the housing sector? Join Adactus Housing for an entertaining and speculative look into the 'world of tomorrow' (Futuraama joke).

### AMICUSHORIZON: Designing mobile solutions to improve customer service & business efficiency - Robert Stewart.

AmicusHorizon was shortlisted for the UK IT Industry Awards 2014, based on its mobile financial inclusion solution and how it gave them the blueprint to build further apps. The presentation will cover: their agile-like methodology; how it carried the business with them; how to take an enterprise approach; and demo examples.

### AXONEX: Connecting your tenants: providing community engagement & insight through the cloud

Axonex, Cisco Meraki & Purple WiFi will demonstrate best practice in terms of scalable wi-fi, legal and security compliance and automatic content filtering. Learn about cloud-managed wi-fi solutions with social media sign-on, allowing you to share information and promote relevant news to users while encouraging tenant engagement.

**Cairn Housing: Using technology to execute our plans - Fin Smith.** In an increasingly complex operating environment, it is vital that technology helps us execute our plans and deliver our objectives. At Cairn, we use a number of solutions to achieve our plans and maintain our

focus on delivering to our tenants.

### CAPITA: Smarter property management: when the Internet of Things meets smart asset management - Stewart Davison.

The Internet of Things (IOT) is here to stay, so how can you harness this to manage your assets in a smarter way and facilitate excellent customer service? Stewart Davison will answer this question and share the results from a recent study to uncover the impact of IoT on social housing.

### CISCO: The future of tenant interactions - Martin Wicks

In today's customer care environment, customers expect to get the service they want using their channel of choice, be it phone, email, web chat or social media. In all cases, they expect the service agent to understand the priority of their engagement and to be skilled in the subject matter.

### CIVICA: Social housing: diversification in a changing world - Martyn Rees.

Recent changes in the market, such as the introduction of welfare reform and the summer rent settlement, are causing many housing providers to diversify, to mitigate risk and to open up new avenues for delivery of services to different audiences. We look at how service provision and excellence need to change to meet these challenges.

### COMMUNITY HOUSING CYMRU: Getting tenants online in Wales; overcoming skills, motivation & affordability barriers - Hayley McNamara.

How housing providers are overcoming digital exclusion in Wales through projects that address skills and motivational barriers, and in particular, the affordability barrier. Should access to affordable broadband

for tenants be a basic expectation from landlords? Why hasn't the market come up with solutions? We will look at how housing providers in Wales are overcoming these issues.

### GOLDEN GATES HOUSING: Transforming front-line services with mobile technology - Peter Fitzhenry.

Golden Gates Housing is working with Footprint Solutions on a mobile solution to get its staff closer to its tenants to improve neighbourhood management, reduce arrears, support tenants struggling with welfare reform and to make financial savings.

### HELENA PARTNERSHIPS: CRM, mobile working & straight-through processing - Louise Hodgson & Dave Roberts.

We have developed a seamless case management system and integrated our mobile solution with our CRM system to provide a streamlined STP approach for our front-line services to support our tenants with extra needs.

### HOME GROUP: Automating outbound contacts for rent collection - Chris Roberts.

Arrears management for 55,000 properties is a challenge that requires a process-driven approach. Home Group will cover how it is implementing the Call2Collect service from Housing Contact to automate its overall rent collection process. Having first piloted and then adopted the service, Chris presents the rationale and results of that decision.

### HOUSING CONTACT COMPANY: Can a commercial head be reconciled with a social heart? - Barry Marlow & Tony Smith.

Barry Marlow and Tony Smith will explore the challenge of change and how we should be going about working our technology and suppliers harder and turning

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data into useful information. Romantics in social housing who dream of golden days of guaranteed income need to realise the realities of the new marketplace. How can our processes and systems enable us to think commercially and act socially in this new landscape?

**HOUSING PARTNERS: Working in an Agile environment with cloud** - Paul Creamer & Jenny McCulloch. Housing Partners has responded to technology change by introducing a new Agile development process and integrated the cloud into its infrastructure. The transition included many challenges; our presentation will show the before and after and our experiences during this process.

**MIDLAND HEART: Understanding the customer journey in the eyes of an industry 'newbie'** - Marc Slack. A presentation providing an insight into the first few months of entering the world of social housing. What are the challenges an IT function faces in how we can provide a digital journey for our staff and tenants? Can we take inspiration from other sectors in considering omni-channel access?

**NETWIT & STADGENOOT: Going Dutch: knowledge-sharing best practices from The Netherlands** - Henk Korevaar, & Arjan van Dijk. In its 15 years' existence, the Dutch network of IT professionals in housing has done many projects with the aim of sharing knowledge among its members. Now it's time to introduce the International Friendship Program that

provides access to a wealth of reports, benchmarks and best (and worst...) practices. The presentation will contain an interesting overview, including total cost of ownership metrics and reference IT architectures.

**NORTHGATE: Challenges to the UK housing sector** - Glen Lewis. The global economic crisis, coupled with the shift to self-financing models and the lack of housing supply has seen fundamental change in the UK housing eco-system. When we also consider that housing is intrinsically linked to almost every major area of government policy, we ask 'what are housing providers doing differently now and how do they address these challenges?'

**ORBIT: Housing goes digital: the right kit... or the right culture?** - Boris Worrall. As housing providers grapple with social media, the expectations of 'generation Y' staff and a tenants increasingly used to banking and shopping online, how do we respond to the digital challenges of tomorrow? And is it more about the way we think, and less about having the latest technology?

**ORCHARD: What next for the key IT vendors in housing?** - Aidan Dunphy. Orchard recently commissioned research involving interviews with a wide range of housing providers on their views on IT provision. Topics included cloud, hosting, SaaS, procurement and an assessment of the main vendors. Aidan Dunphy will present the research's findings and how they could affect the position of key vendors.

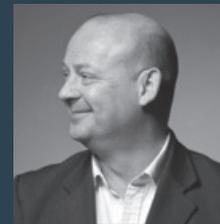
**ORIGIN HOUSING: Digital personal development** - Mark Lordon & Julie Humphreys. How Origin took its digital strategy to a new level: find out how Origin procured and implemented a new content management system to drive personalisation to enrich tenants' digital experience.

**PEAKS & PLAINS: Bringing services direct to your customers: streamlining & digitising housing services** - Simon Penaluna & Neil Bancroft. Can repairs operatives be the new housing officers? Hear about the challenges and the solutions to get an entire workforce out of the office and delivering all the services they can on the doorstep across some of the most rural areas of the country.

**RCT HOMES: Multi-tasking while mobile working** - Alun Dowling. We are taking a totally new view of mobile working. Instead of one task per operative, we have turned the whole process on its head. If someone is at one of our properties, the system will look for what work they can do, based on their skills. For example, a repairs operative at a property to fix a leak may be asked to check on some ASB or clarify some tenant data.

**RED KITE COMMUNITY HOUSING & SOVEREIGN BUSINESS INTEGRATION GROUP: Portraying excellence and pride through innovation, creativity and wise investments** - Helen Anderson. As a young but ambitious housing provider, Red Kite Community

KEYNOTE SPEECHES



**REV. GILES FRASER**  
Giles Fraser is currently the parish priest at St Mary's, Newington, London and writes

a weekly column for The Guardian as well as appearing frequently on BBC Radio 4. He will open the second day of the conference with the keynote presentation. He is a regular contributor on Thought for the Day and a panellist on The Moral Maze. He is visiting professor in the anthropology department at the London School of Economics. He was previously Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral and director of the St Paul's Institute.



**MAGGIE PHILBIN**  
Maggie Philbin, the well-known television presenter and founder/CEO of TeenTech, will give the opening

keynote presentation and will also be chairing our CEO panel discussion during the late afternoon of Wednesday 4th March. By way of background, many of the everyday gadgets that we now take for granted were demonstrated on live television for the very first time by Maggie – the first truly mobile phone, the first car navigation system, the first fax machine and even the first supermarket barcode reader.



**DOMINIC HOLLAND**  
Dominic Holland is a professional comedian, author and after-dinner speaker. He has

also appeared on Have I Got News For You, Loose Ends, and The News Quiz and has hosted his own Radio 4 series. He will be entertaining guests during the informal dinner for all participants on Wednesday 4th March.

Housing has set out to deliver modern, seamless services by designing them with its tenants. Red Kite will talk about its exciting vision for the future and how its journey promises to challenge the 'norm' and open up avenues that make the best use of new technologies.

**ROOFTOP HOUSING: Pulling the plug on offline services (and how to do it) - Barry Cooke.**

How far are we prepared to go in pulling the plug on offline services? Do we encourage and entice them, or can we actually force them to access our services via the web? Rooftop now has 40 per cent of its households registered for our online services. Find out how we've managed to do this and what we're planning to do to double it in the next five years.

**SEVERNSIDE HOUSING: Targeted housing services' investment using data - Sue Groom.**

Use of data allows tenant insight and external and partner information to drive and inform our work with tenants, communities and neighbourhoods. Using data in this way gives a greater understanding of communities and tenant requirements through mapping and profiling. In this way, we support delivery, target resources and evidence outcomes.

**SITS GROUP & TRIDENT SOCIAL INVESTMENT GROUP: Your journey to the utopian private cloud - Phil Cambers & Manpreet Singh.**

Legislation changes, ways of working change, expectations around system availability and uptime has never been higher. Join SITS Group and learn how they can help make your IT infrastructure meet and exceed those expectations. Also you will hear from Trident Social Investment Group about its highly-performant, agile cloud infrastructure.

**SOLIHULL COMMUNITY HOUSING: A commercial approach to social housing - Chris Deery.**

This eclectic presentation will look at the issues around helping tenants

by sharing payment data and the Rental Exchange project. The presentation will also look at the risks and opportunities of developing a more commercial approach to housing and how any profits generated can be used to support the wider community, such as selling a repairs service to staff and members of the public.

**SOUTHERN HOUSING: Social housing 2.0 - Kevin Connell.** As budget pressures grow, the need for landlords to maximise efficiency continues and opportunities exist to contemplate a more fundamental rethink of the ways to do business; the same applies to IT departments. This presentation sets out some of the opportunities and the need for new ways of thinking.

**THAMES VALLEY HOUSING: Delivering services digitally - Jayne Hilditch.** Our vision for the future of customer service delivery is 'digital by design' (rather than default). And we've built a web platform to do just that. It's a fully-responsive design, so works well on smartphones, and covers all core transactional services. We'd love to share our experiences: how we built it, what's worked, and what hasn't.

**TRAFFORD HOUSING TRUST: IT projects vs. business Improvement: moving from legacy to 21st century HMS - Alyson Heald & Louise Cope.** Trafford Housing successfully implemented an integrated housing system in approximately nine months, replacing four legacy systems in one big-bang project. This was followed by a review of system utilisation, with a focus on moving from IT-led implementations to business-led improvement projects. The discussion will cover learnings from the initial project and how they were addressed for future working.

**TRIDENT SOCIAL INVESTMENT GROUP: Digital inclusion: leaving no one behind - Ed Reed.** An overview of Trident's approach to engaging

and supporting vulnerable people in the digital age, while building the infrastructure for future communications and business efficiency. It covers moving from strategy to implementation, plus infrastructure, support and training as vital elements to a successful change programme.

**VRIDIAN HOUSING: Digital innovation at Viridian Housing - Ed Wallace.** Viridian Housing has been developing a range of digital solutions; Ed Wallace will talk about some examples ranging from practical projects, such as their award-winning digital inclusion service, an affordability assessment tool that ensures all new tenancies are set up to succeed, and a data hub to help front-line staff work more effectively with tenants. He will also talk about their new app MoveMaker, which uses functionality from popular dating apps to make it really, really easy for tenants to swap homes.

**WAKEFIELD & DISTRICT HOUSING: Creating the 'connected estate' - Geoff Kirk.** Hear how Wakefield & District Housing is wirelessly connecting our 12 offices, 45 independent living schemes and 31,000 homes. This network will provide better, cheaper business connectivity, give our 450 mobile workers direct access to corporate data, and offer free internet for tenants. We're now exploring how to create our own Internet of Things to transform our business.

**WALES & WEST HOUSING: Building a new housing management system from scratch - Richard Troote.** Housing providers are increasingly finding that their traditional HMS doesn't provide them with the flexible platform that they need. This presentation provides a case study of meeting that challenge head on, by working in an Agile way to deliver an evolving, flexible and device-neutral system in line with business demands.

**WHEATLEY GROUP:**

**Connecting the unconnected - Graeme Hamilton.** Wheatley Group has been piloting the use of digital connectivity in a high-rise block in an effort to help tenants with digital exclusion. Drawing on the experience of the past year, Graeme will explore the lessons learned, the potential for an effective business case, and the drive by the staff and tenants to put online services at the heart of the customer experience.

**WM HOUSING: The journey to IT & housing excellence - Angus Groom.**

WM Housing Group set out to radically overhaul our housing systems and at the same time change our culture to provide more focus on tenants. A story heard before? Well, probably, but for us this means tackling the culture, processes and systems of four independent organisations. Hear about how we have brought these disparate parts together under a single vision which makes a leap forward in using technology and defining a new culture to achieve a shift in attitude and working practices.

**VENUE**

The Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry is a fantastic venue and for the third consecutive year Housing Technology will have exclusive use of all its meeting rooms and conference facilities. The hotel is set in 17 acres of Oxfordshire countryside just a few minutes from the M40 and a short taxi ride from Thame mainline station. There is ample onsite parking.

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## COUNTRY-WIDE WI-FI FROM WALES & WEST WITH CISCO MERAKI

*Wales & West Housing is rolling out a Cisco Meraki-based free wi-fi network spanning 120 locations across Wales.*

Richard Troote, head of ICT, Wales & West Housing, said, "The government's digital inclusion strategy, which aims to get 90 per cent of the UK population online digitally capable by 2020, is very relevant to us. Almost half of our residents don't have access to the internet."

As part of the 'digital by default' agenda, WWH committed itself to provide its tenants, guests and staff with internet access. However, the cost of expanding its existing wireless architecture to accommodate the additional users would have been prohibitively expensive, in terms of wireless controllers, VPN infrastructure and IT staff resources, so the housing provider considered other alternatives, including Cisco Meraki.

Troote said, "Cisco Meraki's proposition was very compelling. The ability to manage thousands of wireless access points, across numerous locations, on an extremely intuitive web-based interface ticked all of our requirements.

"The access points met our requirements but what we were really taken aback by was the ease of installation. We immediately realised that we could roll out Meraki access points across all of our locations with the limited IT personnel we have."

Meraki access points can be configured entirely using the web-based dashboard so that there is no need to physically interact with the devices. In this way, access points can be deployed without any onsite IT staff.

So far, WWH has deployed Meraki wi-fi across almost 20 of its locations in Wales, with another 100 expected to be added soon. Before installation at a new WWH site, a survey is carried out to determine the optimal placements for the wireless access points. Typically, when a new location is going live, the network configuration is completed centrally by the ICT team and onsite installation is carried out by non-IT staff.

Troote said, "There are no IT staff at 99.9 per cent of our locations so being able to deploy, support and maintain the network remotely using the Meraki dashboard is ideal."

The majority of sites have two secured SSIDs, one for staff and one for tenants. WWH also use Meraki Systems Manager to manage employee devices. This is a free mobile device management tool integrated into the same dashboard used for managing wireless access points.

Troote said, "Employee devices are configured using Systems Manager for access to the employee SSID. This allows them to roam seamlessly across sites and access corporate resources whenever they're at a WWH location. And for tenants, we're providing them with simple, reliable and cost-effective wi-fi.

"Features such as the custom DNS filtering and layer 7 firewall capability built into the Meraki dashboard help us to provide what we consider to be an appropriately family-safe network environment for our tenants. The location analytics and summary reporting also gives us some idea of how internet access is helping our tenants."

## Tinder Foundation wins government digital inclusion contract

*A contract with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for a digital inclusion programme has been won by the Tinder Foundation.*

The Future Digital Inclusion programme is part of the government's plan to support people in the hardest to reach communities in England, enabling them to develop online skills and access government services and also to benefit from the opportunities the internet can provide.

The Tinder Foundation will support 200,000 people in 2015 to gain digital skills through its established network of UK online centres. Hundreds of grassroots organisations will be directly grant funded, with thousands of others able to access the online resources and network support that form part of the programme.

The Tinder Foundation is targeting people who are unemployed, on a low income or in low-skilled jobs, people with a disability or learning difficulty, people in rural areas and people who are socially excluded.

Learners will be supported through the Tinder Foundation's learning platform, Learn My Way, which currently helps over 10,000 learners each month to gain web skills such as email, job searching and transacting. The contract will support 2,000 people to go on to achieve a City & Guilds certificate in Basic Online Skills. Over 750 Digital Champion volunteers will be trained to support the programme's delivery in local communities.

Helen Milner, chief executive, Tinder Foundation said, "This digital inclusion programme is a huge commitment from the government to support the most digitally-excluded people to improve their life chances, find work and learn more about the things that interest them. With more and more government services moving online, it is vital the government commits to supporting those without basic online skills to ensure no-one is left behind."

# OMNI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS IN HOUSING

*Housing Technology interviewed experts on omni-channel communications from Arena Partnership, Mplsystems and Omfax about how housing providers can use integrated communications to improve their operational performance and reduce their costs at the same time as providing better and personalised services to tenants.*

## Multi-channel or omni-channel?

It is first worth distinguishing between multi-channel and omni-channel communications because the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably when they are reasonably distinct. Multi-channel communications simply means offering tenants a variety of ways to contact their housing provider, such as phone, email, web and social media. Omni-channel offers the same channels (sometimes more, sometimes fewer), but with the critical difference that all of the channels offer a consistent and integrated experience, with the tenant's information, history, past contacts and queries visible across each and every channel.

Peter Graddon, the managing director of Omfax, said, "Only having a multi-channel approach does not work. The housing sector has moved on from simply shouting down individual channels, such as web, phone or email, to ensuring consistency in our conversations. A successful omni-channel approach should mean that a tenant never has to repeat themselves to the landlord, no matter what communication channel they choose to use."



*"A successful omni-channel approach should mean that a tenant never has to repeat themselves to the landlord, no matter what communication channel they choose to use."*

Peter Graddon, managing director, Omfax

Mplsystems' CEO, Paul White, said, "Multi-channel refers to companies offering customers a choice of channels for customer service. Although adopting two

or more channels, they are not necessarily focused on delivering a seamless or consistent message across multiple touch-points.

"Omni-channel communication refers to companies who also use multiple channels to engage with their customers but differentiate themselves by providing a consistent experience across all channels by integrating their technology into a single system. For example, this means that when a tenant calls the customer service centre to report a nuisance neighbour, the agent has full visibility of the tenant's profile and can also see that they emailed about a problem with their roof two days ago and can therefore update them on how this is progressing."

## Drivers for change

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the most common reasons for housing providers to open up new communications channels, especially online, email, chat and social media, are external drivers such as tenants' demands and expectations and internal drivers such as cost savings and operational efficiencies.

Arena Partnership's director, Alan Marshall, said, "On the one hand, tenants expect the same variety and sophistication of communication channels from their housing provider as they now routinely experience elsewhere. And on the other hand, housing providers have identified opportunities to save costs and improve services by offering alternatives to the old standards of post and phone."

Mplsystems' White said, "One of the most important drivers for multi- and omni-channel take-up is the widespread use of smartphones and the subsequent effect this has had on tenants' demands. Smartphones offer instant access to multiple channels such as email, social and chat and allow them to contact their housing provider regardless of where they are or what time it is.

"The second driver is housing providers realising the operational efficiency of multi- and omni-channel communications and the impact this has on reducing service centre costs. Shifting the volume of calls to channels such as email, self-service or web chat results in shorter average handling times and increased agent productivity."



*"On the one hand, tenants expect the same variety and sophistication of communication channels from their housing provider as they now routinely experience elsewhere. And on the other hand, housing providers have identified opportunities to save costs and improve services by offering alternatives to the old standards of post and phone."*

Alan Marshall, director, Arena Partnership

Omfax's Graddon sounded a note of caution and said, "While online engagement is always going to be cheaper than taking an office on the high street, we must make sure that communications channels are driven by tenants and not by housing providers on the basis of pure cost savings. The key to a successful omni-channel approach is getting the right blend of old and new technology, and ensuring that the same level of service is offered across the board. After all, the greatest driver in customer service is delivering a personalised response; the channel should be irrelevant."

## What do tenants want?

One of the starting points for introducing multi- and omni-channel communications is finding out what tenants want. For example, social media is very good for dealing with simple questions from tenants but less effective when dealing with complex issues around rent arrears or their eligibility for various benefits. This means that housing providers should ideally be able to match different types of communications with tenants' channel preferences.



Marshall from Arena Partnership said, "The answer probably lies in defining a number of 'packages' and recording tenants' preferences for these, rather than trying to capture every option for every potential communication. For example, defining a package where statutory communications are sent by post, general communications are by email and reminders are sent by SMS.

"However, most housing providers don't know much about their tenants' preference because either the 'packages' have not yet been defined and communicated to tenants, the method of recording preferences has not been established, or the systems are not yet in place to ensure communications then adhere to each tenant's preferences."

White from Mplsystems said, "A true omni-channel solution will be able to identify which channel a tenant is making an enquiry through and record this under their contact history. Once the enquiry has been dealt with, the agent can categorise the type of communication and this will be stored against the tenant's profile. The organisation can then not only identify and report on individual customer preferences for different types of enquiry, but also identify customer channel preferences on a larger scale across the business.

"It is important to note that channel preferences are very much dictated by past experience and how well the channels are promoted. Therefore, if a tenant uses the telephone for the majority of enquiries, it may not be that they prefer this channel, it might mean that they were either not aware of or had a bad experience with another channel."

Arena Partnership also pointed out that one of the most effective ways of finding out tenants' preferences was to use other tenant interactions, such as repairs visits or rent arrears calls, to also find out and update their channel preferences, as long as the options are clearly defined and recording systems are in place.



With respect to then actually communicating with tenants according to their preferences, Marshall said, "For standard, regular communications, such as monthly rent statements or quarterly news magazines, this is relatively straightforward. The challenge is much greater for other communications; staff have to check preferences, select channels, segment lists and format messages into multiple versions which is complex and time-consuming without an automated system."

### Nudging tenants

Housing providers are often divided over the extent to which they should 'nudge' tenants towards lower-cost services, in much the same way that utilities and banks, for example, tend to make it very easy for customers to transact online but harder and more time-consuming to access the same service by phone or post. Housing providers would naturally prefer tenants to use services that cost less to run (online vs. bricks & mortar) but not at the expense of alienating them, so what's the balance?

Mplsystems's White said, "Telephone communication remains the most-used channel, but this is often because tenants are not aware that other channels are available and that they can be just as, if not more, effective. Therefore, housing providers should definitely be 'nudging' tenants towards these channels through the promotion of the benefits it would bring them, such as faster responses and no queues.

"Housing providers shouldn't be worried about 'nudging' tenants towards these lower cost channels; as 'generation Y' becomes more influential, text-based

channels such as email, social media and web chat are becoming more popular."

Omfax's Graddon said, "Any 'nudge' should come from the tenant, not the landlord. People are constantly embracing new ways of communicating, but we need to go at their pace. If we start pushing people towards new methods of communication, just because they are cost effective, we risk a drop in service."

### Measuring the benefits

Mplsystems's White concluded, "There are definitely quantifiable benefits of omni-channel strategies. For example, one of our customers previously managed separate systems for its email and voice channels. After implementing an omni-channel solution, it dramatically reduced its email response time by three days and its call handling time by 30 per cent. Another customer integrated its web chat and telephone channels into a single system, with the result that it could handle a 34 per cent increase in customer contacts as well as improving its first-time call rate by 17 per cent."

*Housing Technology would like to thank Alan Marshall (Arena Partnership), Paul White (Mplsystems) and Peter Graddon (Omfax) for contributing to this article, with particular thanks to Arena Partnership for their help with some of the background material.*



## TRENT & DOVE'S VIRTUAL INFRASTRUCTURE WITH SYNAPSE360



*Synapse360 has built a new virtual IT infrastructure for Trent & Dove Housing that provides both office-based and remote workers with fast and secure access to corporate systems.*

The new EMC-based infrastructure replaces the housing provider's legacy hardware and the project is largely in response to the growing demand for 'always on' access to corporate information and the government's 'digital by default' agenda for universal credit and other government services.

Derek Eaton, IT manager, Trent & Dove Housing, said, "IT must play its part in our drive to demonstrate value for money. The starting point for us to achieve that is by having a simple, modern, scalable, high-performing platform that's reliable, easy to manage and can easily accommodate new services."

Synapse360 had originally installed Trent & Dove's virtual infrastructure and disaster recovery capabilities using an EMC VSPEX virtualisation platform and Data Domain backup device.

When the housing provider wanted to improve desktop performance and enable its remote workers to use a variety of devices on the move, Synapse360 added additional hosts and flash storage to the VSPEX and upgraded the Citrix environment by adding a NetScaler appliance to improve load balancing and deliver a consistent user experience. At the same time, a second fibre channel was added.

Eaton said, "The performance improvement was dramatic; office applications opened within a second! We've had lots of positive feedback as all staff, whether office-based or remote, benefit from a consistent desktop performance."

Synapse360 also migrated the workload from Trent & Dove's remaining legacy hardware to the VSPEX platform and in doing so reduced the number of racks in its datacentre from three to one without compromising performance, at the same time as cutting power consumption by 20 per cent.

Eaton said, "We have reduced our operating costs with Synapse360, plus the new infrastructure can easily scale to accommodate new services, such as our forthcoming self-service portal. We have also improved our productivity by eliminating the frustrations of a slow performing system, while enabling our remote workers to do their jobs better on the ground."

"The efficiency of the IT team has improved too; IT staff no longer have to waste their time fire-fighting or making manual tape backups, they are now focused on improving our services."

## Exponential IT changes at Gloucester City Homes

*Gloucester City Homes is planning to upgrade its IT infrastructure, desktop and mobile working solutions to improve service access to tenants, enabling channel shifting and increased digital inclusion. The upgrade will be carried out by Exponential-e as part of a five-year contract to provision, manage and support GCH's entire IT infrastructure.*

Underpinned by Exponential-e's managed services, centralised IT security and future-proofed technology, GCH's move to a cloud environment and virtualised desktops is expected to

improve efficiency and business continuity and enable it to become more agile in the face of changing business needs.

Lesley Williams, Head of IT, Gloucester City Homes, said, "The new virtualised desktop infrastructure will transform the end-user experience, enabling GCH staff to work on any device from any location where there is an internet connection."



# YOU CAN'T PROTECT YESTERDAY

David Beesley, Managing Director, NetDef

*It seems that since time immemorial, the IT world has had its standard for measuring success. The much coveted 'five nines'; the traditional promise of 99.999 per cent uptime for the business, and it is universally accepted that's all you need to know or care about for business continuity.*

It covers the basics of 'likelihood' and 'probability', right? And everyone in the industry knows what it means. All possible measures have been taken to ensure that the lights will stay on but there is a very small chance that something may fail because, well, there are no guarantees. And we all nod and agree because it's a reasonable view of the real world.

However, the cyber security market has no such measure. Its view of success is polarised in comparison. The business itself and the outside world hold two opinions on how secure you are; you've either been breached or you haven't. If you have been compromised, your environment is deemed as insecure and if you're free from all defects, then you must be doing your job well.

Of course, it is a naïve view because a security breach is almost inevitable. The question is what precautions have been taken to reduce the probability. Equally, its measure should include how the business responds when a problem occurs.

Unfortunately, this isn't recognised broadly enough in today's modern market.

The more common story reflects an entirely different outcome. When a breach occurs, it is often accompanied by blind panic and more often than not, a pretty nasty headline, either publicly or at least internally. The person then responsible for security (who has probably spent much of their working life encouraging better practices) gets hauled over the coals or worse still, gets sacked.

Everyone who is considered important then sit around a big table and agree this shouldn't happen again. Somebody is made an example of and it is concluded that the company should spend considerably more money in employing more robust security technology and then the whole affair is swept back under the carpet until next time.

The tragedy, of course, is that there is always a next time because nothing has fundamentally changed. The person responsible may have been replaced but the probability of being compromised hasn't diminished. New technology may have been employed but the risk of it being bypassed is no less likely.

The reality is that much of this can be counterbalanced by an effective security strategy, modern methods to continually monitor and analyse the potential risk, and a grown-up view of the world that appreciates that breaches do occur and that it's how you minimise their chances of success and how quickly you respond that count.

We tend to find that the most sobering process is understanding where the risks lie today. More often than not, we discover that most companies have implemented appropriate security technology but it's either not working at its most effective level or simple things such as the most recent patches haven't been applied (one of the most common reasons for a breach occurring).

There is often a clear explanation for why seemingly straight-forward tasks haven't been addressed. Even if there is a security professional on-site, they're not necessarily spending their days analysing and monitoring the activity at every level in the business.

On paper, everything looks good. They've done their due diligence to ensure that the technology is in place to protect the business and the staff are advised not to do anything stupid like putting unencrypted memory sticks where they shouldn't. It's an appropriate and well-trodden security strategy, but asking

them to monitor the entire business and every conceivable software release and at every entry point 24 hours a day... who has time for that?

And that's the point. Most organisations either don't have the time, resources or necessarily understand the need to constantly update, monitor and analyse and therefore the risk of a breach never reduces.

Positioning security as a managed service may on the surface feel like a partial loss of control, but in practice it is demonstrably the opposite. It allows the introduction and application of a set of checks and balances, analytics and support to ensure that the technology is optimised in real time at every layer so that the probability of a breach is considerably minimised.

'Prevent, detect and respond' is the new simplified security mantra for 2015.

- **Prevent:** how do you make sure your security technology is doing its job at every conceivable entry point, patched and updated to prevent the likelihood of a breach?
- **Detect:** attacks can and will occur; it is how quickly you detect them before any damage is done.
- **Respond:** how will the business respond if you are compromised? Is there a procedure and plan in place that will hit the incident head-on and bury it as quickly as it occurred?

There are no 'five nines' in the world of security, just due diligence and a quantifiable approach to reducing the probability of the risk itself.

It's understandable if most organisations don't have the time or the resources to accomplish this easily. However, it is less understandable if they haven't explored the options available or external support from the right partner that could reduce both their costs and risk.

After all, you can't protect yesterday.

*David Beesley is managing director of NetDef.*



# DON'T TAKE MOBILE COVERAGE FOR GRANTED

Sue Monahan, CEO, Small Cell Forum

## What's the situation?

Mobile coverage is something most of us often take for granted. However, getting a mobile signal, let alone data coverage, in the middle of the countryside or in areas without much previous residential infrastructure can be difficult.

Many new developments are being built on the outskirts of towns in areas without any history of residential usage. While these developments may look great, most new builds are notoriously effective at blocking cellular signals. While some tenants may arrange their own wi-fi, whose responsibility is it to make provision for mobile coverage, and why does it matter?

## Moving away from the landline

A recent report from Ofcom found that more and more people are relying on their mobile phones instead of the traditional landline. This makes mobile coverage essential for those that rarely use their landline to make calls or for families who can't afford them altogether. As fewer households have landlines and the need for mobile coverage increases, something has to give and a change needs to be made.

## People need to get online

For many, not being able to get online would make everyday life impossible. From keeping in touch with loved ones to online services, banking, checking work emails or even access to medical service, data connectivity is essential. For those without a landline or wi-fi, this means using 3G or 4G services. Housing providers cannot rely on households having wi-fi access or being able to get online elsewhere; access to online services at home is essential.

For those with the option to work from home or take on part-time or freelance roles, the inconsistent availability of 3G or 4G services means that many people often have to use Skype or equivalent services to stay in touch. With more employers encouraging staff to work remotely, and the growth in freelance and part-time work, more people require ubiquitous communications.

## Emergency services

Emergency services are also placing greater reliance on mobile signals. In the UK, as the emergency services evaluate a move towards 4G services that could enable live video and data transmissions, mobile coverage in housing developments needs to be up to scratch.

Households without landlines also represent a serious problem for emergency services as it reduces the potential response time for services if residents are unable to contact them. The design of social housing complexes often also means that the point of entry to a home is not always on the ground floor.

## Where does the problem arise?

Architects and designers rarely make communications a priority. While some may incorporate a phone line, connectivity of any other kind is hardly ever factored into residential design.

Making architects and designers aware of the need to consider mobile coverage as a part of their design remit is one of the first steps in ensuring that homes have access to mobile coverage and associated services.

Mobile coverage in rural and remote areas is also a huge problem for government, the mobile industry and those charged with building new housing developments. Estates in cities represent a significant challenge, but new builds in remote areas can be especially problematic.

Collaboration between architects, planners and mobile operators is now a priority to ensure that homes are not left with poor or non-existent mobile services.

## The changing face of mobile networks

The massive growth in smartphones means basic voice coverage is no longer enough. Mobile operators now need to provide enough capacity in their networks to let us stream videos, download emails and access social media.

This means a move away from the big towers that we're all used to seeing on the tops of hills and buildings, towards new technologies that provide very specific

areas or buildings with fast 3G and 4G coverage. This is where town planners, architects and mobile operators are key to providing comprehensive mobile network coverage in homes.

For urban areas and housing complexes, it's important that architects and designers think about the implementation of technologies that can provide mobile network coverage.

## New technology, new applications

Providing mobile coverage from inside buildings or targeted for specific estates and developments can open up a range of new services and use cases that would have never been possible before.

One area is in monitoring the overall movement of people and spotting popular routes and areas. The information provided to housing providers can help to improve current estates and also influence the design of future builds.

For residents, it can facilitate a move away from the traditional reliance on landlines, instead being able to use portable mobile devices to work or access the internet from in and around the home.

## What needs to happen next?

The 4G roll out in the UK is gaining pace with most of the major cities and towns now covered, but the targeted coverage mentioned earlier is essential if people are to really make the most of these services. And that's before we even start looking ahead to what 5G might bring.

Mobile coverage is no longer a 'nice thing to have' or something that people can live without; it's essential. The problem is that the way we use mobile networks has changed, to the point where building planners, architects and local authorities need to work alongside mobile operators to ensure that residents don't lose out. The technology exists to make this a reality so it's now down to the planners and builders to ensure that mobile coverage is something that is considered at the earliest stages.

*Sue Monahan is the CEO of the Small Cell Forum.*

# HOUSING PROVIDERS AND THE INTERNET OF THINGS

*A new report from Capita has suggested that housing providers should be looking at ways of harnessing the Internet of Things (IoT) to help increase efficiencies and improve their services to tenants.*

The paper, titled 'Smarter property management: when the Internet of Things meets smart asset management', explores how housing providers could use the IoT (the concept where all devices, such as heaters, boilers, and fridges, are connected to the internet) to help cut their annual bill for repairs to 'non-decent' homes through smart asset management. Devices such as smart meters, humidity sensors and smart boilers are highlighted in the report as potential breakthroughs that housing providers should be considering for their stock.

Some of the suggestions in Capita's report include:

- By receiving constant accurate information on the state of their housing, providers would be able to carry out repairs exactly at the point of need and ensure they prevent costly problems;
- The IoT could save a huge amount of administrative time, phone calls, and multiple visits to diagnose and carry out repairs;
- Further savings could be made on insurance and lending premiums, if a housing provider can provide an up-to-the-minute assessment of the condition of all of its housing stock.

Roger Birkinshaw, director of housing, Capita's software services business, said: "Many housing providers don't realise that the technology behind the IoT is now a



reality. This report is a timely reminder to housing providers that if they want to make the most of this emerging technology, they should be building it into their business plans as soon as possible."

# PHOENIX BACKS UP CASTLE VALE

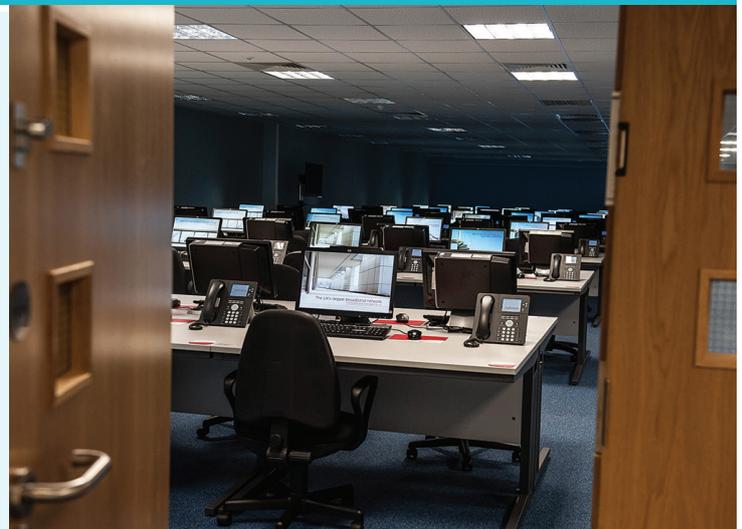
*Castle Vale Community Housing Association has replaced its tape-based backup and recovery infrastructure with a cloud-based, managed service from Phoenix. The new service is faster and more reliable than its previous infrastructure and offers 'pay as you grow' scalability.*

Mohammed Sarfraz, IT & network administrator, Castle Vale Community Housing Association, said, "We need to ensure our systems are available, data isn't lost and we have access to up-to-date information to run our business, for people to work productively, and to serve tenants who expect to receive high levels of service from us at all times.

"12 servers support business-critical activities and include two Citrix servers, two SQL Servers, the core housing management system, a finance server and a file and print server. These are all covered by Phoenix's traditional and cloud-based Recovery Assurance services. It is essential that these systems work at all times so that, whatever happens, we can ensure continuity of service."

Castle Vale began using Phoenix for business continuity services in 2005. Sarfraz said, "That's worked exceptionally well. We've run numerous tests, at least twice a year, and invoked the service at least once a year, for example if a server fails, and every time it has been a success."

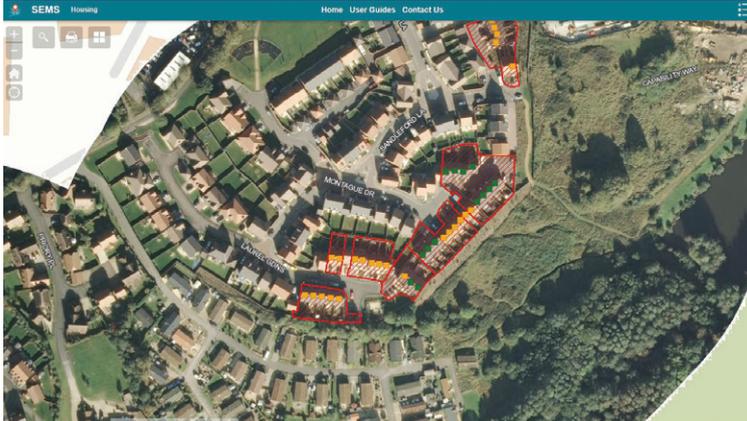
Phoenix was then asked to provide offsite data backup and data storage. Sarfraz said, "Tape backups meant additional time and resources, and it took longer to restore when problems arose, for example if data became corrupted. And because of the backup schedule, we weren't getting the most up-to-date data



restored either. Now, we can restore instantly from the same day and so waste less time.

"If you need anything, the Phoenix staff suggest the right approach rather than trying to sell us more. Phoenix is quick to respond, and the quality of service is very good; for example, understanding our set-up and building Citrix servers at their end before installing them on site. And when you call, you know they'll take action without you having to go through lots of people. And Phoenix's prices are certainly competitive with the rest of the market: price-wise, it's bang on."

## Sovereign Housing invests in Esri GIS for business transformation



*Sovereign Housing Association is implementing new mapping technology from Esri to support its business transformation programme, including a planned increase in the properties under its management from 38,000 at the moment to 50,000 by 2018.*

The three-phase GIS development programme started in September 2014. Phase one is now live, which included training more than 500 staff from Sovereign's housing management, property services, service charge and grounds maintenance departments to use the mapping software. Sovereign is also using Esri's GIS software in a pilot to identify areas of adjoining Sovereign and local authority land which would be most suitable to build homes on.

Sovereign's goal is to build an advanced company-wide GIS system that will provide a single point of access to vast amounts of map-based data, accessible to all staff. This will support both operational and development strategies while enabling staff to provide tenants with improved services. The housing provider anticipates that by mapping all of its assets and sharing this data with all employees, greater insight will be gained into key operational issues such as stock condition, rent arrears and occupancy levels.

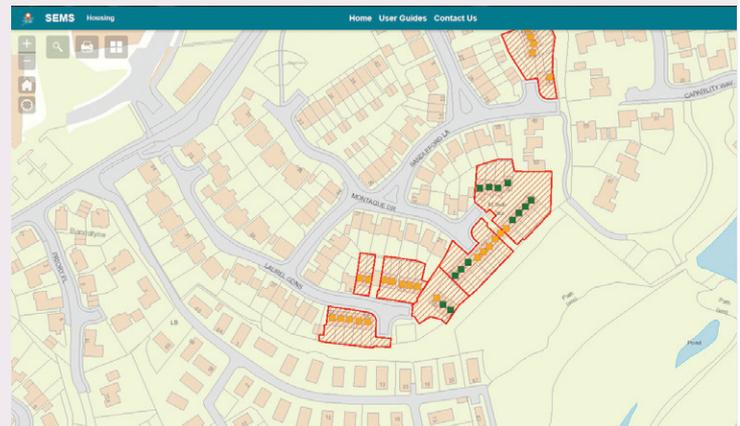
Other areas where analysing geographic patterns will help to deliver better services include gaining an improved understanding of how employment patterns, earnings levels and benefit changes affect residents. At the same time, plotting

the results of Sovereign's customer satisfaction survey is expected to reveal issues at a local level, rather than remaining hidden in spreadsheet data.

Sovereign is also keen to look at how the software can help it with flood risk analysis by mapping every property against flood data from the Environment Agency and other sources. In the longer-term, it is hoped that this information will result in reduced insurance premiums and help Sovereign to prioritise which residents need help first in the event of flooding.

Andy Bradley, GIS manager, Sovereign Housing Association, said, "Our priority is to build a new web-based GIS that will provide the foundation for better decision-making.

"Using GIS as the basis for making better business decisions further reinforces Sovereign's reputation as one of the country's most innovative housing providers. The Esri software will save us both time and money at the same time as demonstrating best practice to our peers across the social housing sector."



Once the first phase is complete, Sovereign's GIS team will focus on improved delivery of data on multiple devices, including smartphones and tablets, so employees can make real-time updates in the field. External-facing web maps for tenants will also be explored as a way of supporting further improvements in customer services.

## Weslo Housing's triple win from Investors in People

*Weslo Housing Management has become the first organisation in Scotland to achieve all three awards available from Investors in People Scotland.*

The company has received the IIP Gold, IIP Health & Wellbeing, and Investors in Young People (IYYP) awards. The IIP Gold places Weslo in the top seven per cent of all IPP-accredited companies in the UK.

Peter Russian, chief executive, Investors in People Scotland, said, "Becoming the first organisation to accomplish all three awards is a real mark of the high esteem in which Weslo holds

its people. This represents a true commitment to employees and demonstrates a solid foundation of good practice which remains challenging and aspirational for many organisations.

"Weslo HM is one of the first organisations in Scotland to achieve the IYYP accreditation. Its dedication to the employment and development of young people cannot be understated."

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## IT SUPPLIERS SUPPORT COTTSWAY HOUSING TO HELP SAVE LOCAL FOOD BANK



*Cottsway Housing Association in Oxfordshire has been overwhelmed by the support from some of its IT contractors and suppliers after the volunteers running the Oxfordshire West Food Bank asked the housing provider for help.*

Due to limited space and access, as well as a lack of heating and facilities for the volunteers, the food bank was facing possible closure before Christmas

2014. Cottsway offered the food bank the use of one of its offices, complete with facilities, for up to six months at first, with a promise to consider longer-term options.

Cottsway converted the office to make it suitable for the food bank, including the installation of racking for much-needed storage space. They also helped with the move by providing transport and staff volunteers.

Bart Meldau, head of business support, Cottsway Housing Association, said, "We asked some of our IT contractors and suppliers for donations towards this project which will go towards the costs of the move, the equipment needed and to keep the food bank running.

"Their response was very generous. MIS Active Management Systems, who are our main software supplier, made a substantial donation. This was followed by an equally generous contribution from Documotive whom we're working with to improve our electronic documents and records management. We also received significant donations from The JDI Partnership and our telephony provider ONI. It will all go towards providing a much-valued community service."

Jeanette Allerston, software development director, MIS Active Management

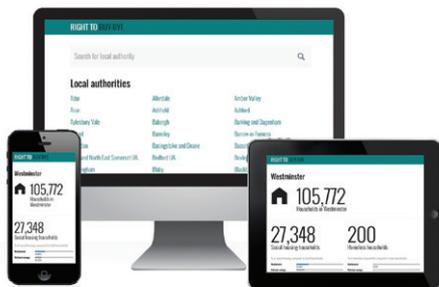
Systems, said, "Cottsway has been a long-standing partner with MIS-AMS and has helped us develop our product range. When we heard they were putting a rescue package together for a local food bank, we were only too happy to help."

Sue Lakin, Cottsway's operations director, added, "We are very much a community-based organisation and are keen to do what we can to sustain such an important lifeline for people who are in genuine need. The generous donations we received are very much appreciated and have made a huge difference to the food bank, its volunteers and, more importantly, to those who use the food bank."



According to the Trussell Trust, over 900,000 people received three days' emergency food from its food banks during 2013-14 compared with around 350,000 people in 2012-13.

## DXW wins Accountability Hack with 'Right to Buy-Bye'



Led by Lily Dart, DXW's head of service design, the company created 'Right to Buy-Bye, an app which compared homelessness, social housing stocks and privately-sold social housing in each local authority. DXW's app won the ONS Challenge.

Harry Metcalfe, managing director, DXW, said, "We were really pleased that 'Right to Buy-Bye' won the ONS Challenge and Best in Show. Although it's not possible to

draw any real-world conclusions from the project because the data was pulled from a variety of sources and was far from perfect, the app does demonstrate how clever needn't be complicated and the kind of analysis that can and should be done if you can access accurate information from local authorities."

DXW's winning app was one of 19 submitted projects from the 60 participants and was built

using Ruby on Rails, Zurb Foundation, SASS and HAML.



*DXW, a provider of digital services to the housing sector, recently spent 48 hours at the National Audit Office in London for Parliament's 'Accountability Hack 2014' in order to demonstrate what can be achieved over one weekend, powered by nothing more than skill, talent and caffeine, and going on to win the ONS Challenge and Best in Show.*

## Aspire Group celebrates milestone with 300th apprentice



Aspire Housing bought a training company in 2008 in order to help young people into work. Since then, PM Training has trebled in size and has helped thousands of 16-19 year olds get jobs with more than 900 companies throughout Staffordshire.

Over the last five years, this has been the route into employment for 300 young people who have become apprentices at Aspire Group; at any one time, apprentices comprise 10 per cent of the workforce. Aspire Group also directly employs young apprentices to work within the group, in a

wide range of roles from business administration to gardening.

Georgia Robson is Aspire's 300th apprentice, and is employed in the painting and decorating team, working on some of the housing provider's 9,000 properties. She said, "At PM Training, they take you through a series of tasters of different courses to see what you have a talent for. That really helped me to work out what I wanted to do. Since then, I haven't looked back.

"Any given week could see me with a couple of other learners and our supervisor

either renovating existing Aspire Housing properties, or decorating new builds for the first time. The feeling of seeing the job finished, and finished well, is really rewarding."

Will Nixon, deputy chief executive, Aspire Group, said, "We create around 700 apprenticeships a year, working with around 1,000 companies. However, we also practice what we preach in our own company and we're very proud of the 300 apprentices who have passed through Aspire Group's workforce over the past six years."

*Continuing Housing Technology's ongoing support for housing providers and IT suppliers to the housing sector who take on apprentices, we are pleased to report that Aspire Group has recently taken on its 300th apprentice.*

## TOWN & COUNTRY HOUSING SAVES £75,000 WITH BOARDPAD



*Town & Country Housing Group is now using BoardPad software to create and distribute board packs for more than 50 board, committee and group executive meetings.*

Paul Cooper, deputy company secretary, Town & Country Housing Group, said, "We estimated that it was costing us around £75,000 per year to put together our paper packs. We also wanted to reduce the amount of time it took for the company secretary's department to collate, print and despatch the papers.

"After having looked at four competitive products, we selected BoardPad as it offered us the best all round package, including training and support."

The switch to BoardPad has improved the efficiency of both administrators and board members. BoardPad's intuitive interface and the ability to access board reports promptly has improved the overall decision-making abilities of the housing provider's board and executive members. The 'reading room' feature in particular has become a useful tool for storing the group's governance information, enabling the board to reference material easily and quickly.

Cooper said, "BoardPad is a time-saving tool for the company secretarial team. We can now set up a meeting from scratch and issue reports to members within three or four hours, rather than it taking days and having to rely on the post to deliver the reports."





# THE BOARDROOM PAPER CHASE

Alister Esam, Managing Director, BoardPacks

*The quarterly board meeting may be one of the fundamental aspects of traditional corporate structures. But it has remained completely unchanged, still relying in the majority of cases on hundreds of pages of paper presented and collated up to several weeks before the meeting. But with budgetary pressures and the need for real-time problem solving, just how effective is this model today? How many critical decisions are shelved 'for the next meeting' due to lack of information? And how much time does any member spend considering these critical issues in-between meetings?*

This 'minute and forget' approach is no longer acceptable. Not only does the board need to improve its decision-making during meetings, but members need to interact and engage with the organisation better throughout the year. And that requires a better way of information sharing than the traditional voluminous paper 'board pack'.

## Board bottleneck

In recent years, resident involvement has become central to the way in which government and local organisations approach the delivery of housing services. The benefits of resident involvement can be considerable, to the business, residents and the wider community.

Indeed, many housing providers value a tenant's perspective at board level; housing boards are unusual in that only a minority of board members have any experience of the type of service that they are governing. In contrast, school governors and board members of healthcare trusts will all have first- or second-hand experience of the relevant service. Including even one or two residents on a housing provider's board is therefore often seen as being important in ensuring that the focus and strategic direction of the organisation takes account of residents' experiences.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that 95 per cent of UK organisations still adhering to the traditional 250-500 page board pack have not yet made attempts to update this model. But why? Paper is inefficient and inconvenient. Managing paper-

based resources is time consuming. How much time is wasted in board meetings simply verifying the information to hand, rather than actually discussing and taking essential strategic decisions? Furthermore, how much time and money is wasted by administrative staff undertaking mundane print, copy and collate tasks before each meeting?

## PDF distraction

Of course, a few organisations have attempted to remove the paper burden by opting for the electronic transmission of documents by emailing members PDFs of the board papers. But this model is actually a backwards step. Not only is there no version control, creating the risk of more confusion during meetings, but also board members are often forced to then download various third-party annotation tools in order to make comments on the papers, even though those comments can't then be easily shared. The result is nothing more than a poor imitation of the traditional paper-based process and is certainly no improvement in decision-making activity.

## The 'Google' of board packs

The question is how can housing providers take advantage of this insight and extend the efficacy and responsiveness of the board beyond the quarterly board meeting?

Housing providers need to consider the use of targeted meeting tools that provide a fast, consistent way of providing that essential board pack. A way that enables individual board members to access board papers, securely and efficiently from a tablet, at any time and delivers that information in a structured, ordered format. With multiple options that include both on-premise and cloud-based models that enable administrative staff to securely store one version of the board pack that can be accessed by board members via any device.

In addition to providing board members with the chance to access information at any time, the key benefit comes from exploiting technology to enhance the way

information is presented and shared. For example, documents and links can be easily assigned to particular agenda items, making it easier for members to go directly to specific items of interest. Documents can be annotated using simple tools, and these annotations can be shared with other board members before the meeting. And, critically, board members can search current and historic documents easily at any time, including during the meeting, to create a far more interactive discussion and better decision-making.

## Improving decision-making

With one-click document distribution, not only can the organisation drastically reduce the essential paper, print and collate costs, it frees up administrative staff to complete the more important day-to-day activities that are typically interrupted by the quarterly board meeting. But that is just the start; this online approach changes the way board members can make decisions both within and outside meetings.

For example, during the meeting the board can use in-built interactive risk assessment and governance tools to provide a top level view of corporate risks. This is crucial for the housing sector, following the introduction of the HCA's Sector Risk Profile in 2013, aiming to raise awareness of the key risks associated with housing providers. It also supports the National Housing Federation's 'Excellence in Governance' code intended to help housing providers take a more systematic approach to compliance.

Rather than trawling through hundreds of pieces of paper, members can understand immediately the current risks, the controls that are in place and identify gaps that need to be addressed. They can use the real-time search to locate relevant information and gain the insight required to make a decision immediately, rather than re-tabling the issue for a subsequent meeting.

## Beyond the board meeting

Furthermore, while real-time access to information provides a chance to improve

## THE BOARDROOM PAPER CHASE

the effectiveness of board members during the meeting, the most fundamental change is the way members can interact with the business between meetings. Combining alerts to information with updates on key topics raised during the meeting, plus decision-making functionality that incorporates discussion and voting tools and reminds members of outstanding items, can enable boards to take votes and make decisions outside the board meeting.

This can lead to considered conclusions that are less likely to be swayed by more dominant members of the board. This ensures delays are avoided and the board

meeting can concentrate on the top strategic issues, and better harness the insight of the resident board members rather than risk being derailed by minor yet pressing concerns.

Given the pressure on housing providers to become ever more efficient, responsive and agile, it is clear that tapping into the valuable insight of residents can have a positive impact on the business, the residents and the wider community. But in order to truly maximise the value of this insight, housing providers need to extend the decision-making capabilities of the board beyond the quarterly board meeting.

With continuous real time access to information via a raft of devices, board members have the chance to be constantly engaged with the organisation, taking decisions throughout the quarter, not just at meetings. Those boards that move away from paper and look to actively and continuously exploit real-time access to information will transform both the speed and effectiveness of decision-making at every level.

*Alister Esam is the managing director of BoardPacks.*

## BAKER TILLY WARNING ON WELFARE REFORM

*According to consultants Baker Tilly, while the impact of welfare reform on the social housing sector has so far been less significant than expected, housing providers should still be wary of downgrading the risks.*

The company's benchmarking survey of 70 housing providers to assess the impact of welfare reforms found that the average rent arrears during 2013/14 was 3.3 per cent, slightly down on the 3.9 per cent anticipated in the same survey last year. However, providers also predicted that rates would rise to 4.1 per cent on average in 2015/16 once the wider roll-out of universal credit takes effect.

The housing providers reported an increase in voids of 4.1 per cent during 2013/14, but expected them to fall to 3.7 per cent during 2015/16.

Almost 70 per cent of the housing providers in the survey reported that they had taken on additional members of staff in the last 12 months as a direct response to welfare reforms, with two-thirds of them recruited to permanent roles including welfare benefits advisers, rent collection and debt recovery officers.

Gary Moreton, head of social housing, Baker Tilly, said, "Our survey suggests that housing providers have coped well with the removal of the spare room subsidy and the introduction of the benefit cap, but the risks from the introduction of universal credit haven't gone away, particularly as evidence from the universal credit pilot areas clearly shows that more tenants go into arrears when moved onto universal credit."



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## TELECARE AT HEREFORDSHIRE HOUSING

*Simon Herdsfield, head of customer services for Herefordshire Housing Group describes how new thinking around care and support using technology-enabled care services (TECS) has come to life in Hereford.*

Henffordd Gardens is one of the group's newest enhanced living schemes, and is a perfect example of the ways we are working to implement our philosophy of supporting good physical and mental health, helping people to enjoy rich and fulfilling lives and creating communities that people feel safe in, feel inspired by and want to contribute to.

The scheme is a multi-use city centre development comprising 30 apartments and one three-bed re-ablement unit, with on-site concierge and support teams. However, what makes it different is that we have firmly embedded TECS into the personalised support we offer residents. Not only are some aspects of technology physically hardwired into the building, but more importantly, TECS is firmly entrenched into the culture. It's central to how we've created a people-centric, community-based system of care.

So what does that mean in practice? Well, in terms of the technology, we've worked with Tunstall to ensure we're at the forefront of technology, including the Communicall Vi platform which means staff receive relevant information at their fingertips, enabling them to prioritise care delivery. This includes a tablet-based dashboard which shows the status

of residents at a glance, an ultrafast communications system which allows staff to communicate with residents and each other, and provides a platform for telecare solutions. All residents have the means to request help if they need it 24 hours a day, using their personal pendants or speech modules. Support packages may include other sensors such as fall detectors or bed occupancy sensors which will raise an alert if the user leaves their bed and fails to return after a pre-set time period.

Henffordd Gardens was also one of the first schemes in the country to have an information kiosk in its communal area, which gives all residents free internet access. The kiosk enables residents to report a repair, check their rent balance and shop online in a secure online environment and with the support of staff if required. The scheme also features a digital notice board; a large wall mounted screen in the communal area providing all the latest news, weather and information about social events relating to Henffordd Gardens. Residents can also use myworld, a range of tailored apps on a tablet which enables users to view, request and schedule appointments such as care visits, order meals, find out about social events and send and receive messages and emails.

We believe that Henffordd Gardens has shown that it is possible to create a sustainable model of personalised care which supports mental and physical needs,

and enables people to live life to the full. It moves TECS solutions from an abstract concept to a warm and welcoming home which helps people to feel safe, cared for and confident.

Henfford Gardens is just the start. We continue to work with Tunstall to develop new approaches to care solutions which provide an alternative to more traditional and costly care pathways and focus on enabling service users to maintain their independence. Tunstall's latest innovation, Communicall ViIP, gives residents a state-of-the-art touchscreen phone which not only acts as a hub for on and offsite communications, but also supports the use of apps which can be tailored to the provider's and user's needs. It also has the option to provide broadband, telephony and wi-fi direct to residents in a cost effective way.

The 'art of the possible' has changed enormously during my time working in the housing sector, and the speed of change is accelerating. Only by working in partnership can housing providers ensure that they are aware of everything the latest technology has to offer the people we support, enabling us to make the right choices, and ensuring that our legacy is homes fit for the future.

*Simon Herdsfield is head of customer services at Herefordshire Housing Group.*

## MOBYSOFT LAUNCHES TRAINING COURSES

*Mobysoft has created a new series of training courses for its housing customers. The first of the free courses will be delivered in association with the Landlord Information Network, focussing on how housing providers' staff can improve their negotiation skills in order to maximise rental incomes.*

Derek Steele, CEO, Mobysoft, said, "We don't consider ourselves to be an IT software provider; we are a service provider that aims to work closely with our customers and support them in as many ways as we can. I am therefore thrilled to announce this training initiative which offers added value to customers as their workloads and budgets continue to be stretched to the limit."

## Diligent Boardbooks adopted by Viridian Housing



*Viridian Housing has reported on the success of its project to move from paper-based information packs for its executive team and board members to electronic packs using Diligent Boardbooks.*

Before using Diligent Boardbooks, the Viridian team prepared paper packs of information for each board, executive and committee meeting, comprising around 45 people and around 50 meetings in total each year. As a result, Viridian wanted to move to a digital board portal as part of a long-term strategy to secure and digitise confidential personal information relating to the individuals using its housing services, as well as to make the compilation of the information packs quicker and cheaper.

Shirley Griffiths, executive assistant, Viridian Housing, said, "We saw a number of systems that were much too complicated and obviously designed to suit the needs of larger organisations. But we were pleasantly surprised by the Diligent Boardbooks solution; its simple functionality and impressive security were really appealing. It did exactly what we wanted, and did it well, within the budget available."

Aslam Jahan, project manager, Viridian Housing, said, "I can't stress strongly enough how important data security is for us. We deal with very sensitive data so security was our main concern when looking at a board portal."

Using Boardbooks, Viridian's board, executive and committee members now have instant, secure access to all the

information they need. Jahan said, "Users have access to any updates straight away, so they know they're always reviewing the latest information. It is also easy to access historical information via the archive section, so they can refer back to previous meeting notes and new users can get up to speed quickly."

The new system is saving Viridian's administrative team so much time each month that when one member of the team left the company, the rest of the team was able to absorb the role.

Griffiths said, "Creating and distributing paper packs took a full-time role, albeit spread across a number of people. Not only is Boardbooks a cost-effective solution for Viridian, but it is also helping us to save money in other ways."



## Top service from Nottingham On Call



*Nottingham City Homes' Nottingham On Call service has retained its accreditation from the Telecare Services Association.*

Nottingham On Call is a 24-hour emergency response service for NCH tenants, plus those from other housing organisations, who sign up for the service. It works through a telephone link to a Nottingham-based call centre and allows tenants who have signed up to get support and advice at any time if, for example, they have had a fall or are ill.

The service works closely with NCH's mobile support team and Independent Living service. It currently has 10,700 users and provides them with an instant response to get the help they need, from knowledgeable local people, with operators staying on the line with callers until help arrives, with 24-hour linkage to the On Call control centre, and easy installation.

Gill Moy, director of housing, Nottingham City Homes, said, "Nottingham On Call is a vital lifeline for many people and allows them to live independently in their own home, safe in the knowledge that help is just a push of a button away."



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