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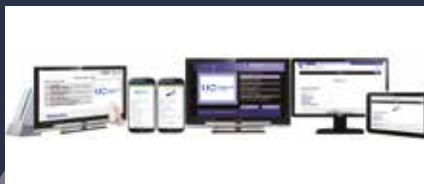
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EDITOR'S NOTES

GETTING THE MESSAGE YET?

At the recent Housing Technology 2015 conference, a common theme throughout almost every single presentation and indeed the IT leaders' panel discussion was the difficulty of either integrating different applications (even those from the same supplier) and/or transferring data easily between them.

Regardless of whether people were talking about messaging, APIs, integration, data transfer, data migration, straight-through processing, or even omni-channel delivery, the big problem is the lack of any consistent and common means of moving data between applications without coming up against hurdles in the forms of (variously) costs, staff resources, time, manual processing, and errors and duplications, to name just a few.

Those readers with good memories may remember that we set up what was known as the Housing Technology Standards Board in 2008/9, with the support of around 50 housing providers and IT suppliers. The full stories are available on our website (select the 'topics' search filter and then select 'Technology Standards').

In light of what was said at the conference, it's worth revisiting a precis of what the Housing Technology Standards Board was trying to do:

- To create open, independent and application-neutral standards and structures for data transfer between disparate IT and business applications/services (e.g. the iCal/vCal standard for calendars);
- To ensure that the standards cover as wide a range of processes as possible without diluting the core aims or becoming too complex or specific;
- To encourage and educate end-user organisations (i.e. HAs and RSLs) in the merits

of adopting and enforcing these standards, with support and endorsement from industry bodies;

- To use the standards as a means of improving IS quality and making consequent improvements in tenant services, internal decision-making, supplier communications and external reporting;
- To make it easier, cheaper and faster to switch IT applications and services, thereby increasing choice and reducing supplier lock-in;
- To encourage the adoption of minimum requirements in tender/RFP documents, such as the supplier's database and interface schemas and their adherence to HTS v1.0.

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, the standards board was probably too much, too soon. But now with the widespread use by both housing providers and IT suppliers of, for example, web services, cloud computing and the various software-, platform- and infrastructure-as-a-service (XaaS) models, the concept of developing some common messaging standards has a good chance of becoming a reality.

With that in mind, Housing Technology would like to put itself forward to act as an IT-neutral 'clearing house' representing the interests of housing providers and IT suppliers, with the aim of being the catalyst for a critical mass of support for some IT messaging standards in the housing sector.

If you would like to voice your opinion on this subject or express an interest in actively contributing to the creation of some IT standards, please contact us via standards@housing-technology.com.

EVENTS

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY – IN-DEPTH 2015: BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE & ANALYTICS

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- TELECARE

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HOUSING PARTNERS LAUNCHES NEW HOMESWAPPER SERVICE

Housing Partners has just launched a brand new version of its HomeSwapper service, with many new features for both housing providers and tenants.

The new service is already being used by over 700 housing providers and their tenants across the UK and has been built using the latest coding techniques, faster databases and fully mobile technology.

Richard Blundell, CEO, Housing Partners, said, "We've spent a lot of money in rebuilding HomeSwapper from the ground up. New user interfaces have been designed to make the experience as user-friendly as possible, taking inspiration from the social media that our users are already familiar with.

"There are new search and mapping functions, including drag-and-drop mapping, and users can also drill down to just 160 metres from a location, adding a very local element to a national solution. In-system messaging also means that personal details are kept secure, while much wider search criteria makes it easier for tenants to find the exact property they're looking for.

"Perhaps the biggest change to the system is our 'multi-swap' feature. This is fully automated and automatically finds possible chains for tenants from our database of hundreds of millions of match opportunities."

As well as improvements for tenants, housing providers will benefit from new

analytic dashboards and reporting tools. Stock can also be better utilised through the improved RightSize best use of stock tool and the new 'suggest a match' function.

With more than 40 per cent of users accessing HomeSwapper from a mobile device, the web service is now fully mobile, with a separate mobile site designed to ensure tenants can access HomeSwapper wherever they are.

Blundell said, "The introduction of the 'bedroom tax' has highlighted just how important Mutual Exchange is to tenants. We've seen a significant increase in the number of exchanges taking place through HomeSwapper since the reforms came into force."

ABRITAS DELIVERS BETTER CBL SERVICES FOR SELECT MOVE

Select Move, which provides choice-based letting services to housing providers and local authorities, has transformed its CBL website by using Abrisas's latest housing portal, at the same time as streamlining its 'enhanced housing options' offering.

Select Move has used its original Abrisas system to provide CBL services since 2005 when it was originally implemented by Preston City Council before its stock transfer to Community



Gateway Housing Association. Since then, the Select Move service is now being used on a partnership basis by Accent Foundation, Adactus Housing, Chorley Borough Council, Chorley Community Housing, Contour

Housing, Great Places, New Progress Housing, South Ribble Council and Your Housing Group.

The housing providers and local authorities in the Select Move partnership use the Abrisas system to manage a common housing register and allocations policy across all members. In addition, Select Move uses Abrisas's mobile website to help increase accessibility and provide their customers with an on-the-go service; Select Move's mobile website now accounts for over 36 per cent of its total bids.

The new Select Move website was launched in December last year with the emphasis on significantly reducing the number of applications entered by staff and removing the need to send out paper forms.

Helen Bamber, neighbourhood care manager, Community Gateway Association, said, "The feedback on our fantastic new website has been amazing. Within 24 hours of the site going live, a tenant rang to compliment Community Gateway on the fresh look and feel of our site and its ease-of-use."

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Tony Smith, Independent IT Consultant

INSPIRING CHANGE IN SOCIAL HOUSING

What does it take to get the people who work in social housing really inspired?

Well, at the Housing Technology 2015 conference this month, Barry Marlow and I both had a really good go at it. Barry is one of those charismatic, dyed in the wool housing types who work with housing providers to help them think commercially while acting socially. He would be the first to admit he is the Yin to my Yang, as a well-known blogger about the practical elements of social housing IT and how to overcome those 'rocks in the road' that always crop up on the type of change and transformation journey proposed by Barry.

Indeed, thinking commercially is a somewhat alien notion in housing and often provokes comments, discussion and fury in many quarters. However, we both believe that the sector could be seriously sleepwalking into choppy waters if we don't tackle some of the big issues that tend to be swept under the carpet and avoided thus far. Welfare reform and universal credit, however painfully slow, could well be our undoing once the previously guaranteed 70 per cent of our income is paid direct to tenants.

For years we have kept processes pretty much the same and only tinkered around the edges in most cases. Barry preaches the mantra of thinking more about what we are looking to achieve, rather than clinging to the 'way we have always done it'. He is controversial and, frankly, that is the point. Rather than adding a few fields to that tenancy sign-up form, start from scratch and work out what we really want to achieve.

Everyone else we deal with knows us so much better than we understand our own customers. Amazon constantly reminds us that we 'might like this', because we 'previously bought or downloaded that'. The real world works like that because companies get closer to their customers and users that way. These are tricks we need to learn and pretty damn quick. We need to know more about our households, their needs, how we can

reach out to them and engage them in our communities.

You can understand why Barry and I get agitated and animated. From Barry's perspective, our IT is just not up to it. My perspective, on the other hand, is that we spend thousands of pounds on pretty good CRM modules and most RSLs struggle to maintain even 75 per cent accuracy for contact numbers. That's clearly not the fault of IT or systems; it comes back to poor management allowing it to happen among those staff who should be collecting this stuff. Clearly, for once, this is not the fault of the IT team either (phew, not often you can say that!).

So what targets did Barry and I have on our dartboard? Well, better control of tenant arrears was one and reward schemes were another.

Barry is very keen to look at our neighbourhoods as little enterprises or franchises. In that way, we can look at what we spend, what we receive in rent, how desirable the area is and how much crime and ASB exists there. When banks grant us loans, sell us insurance, or target us for credit cards, this is what they look at. Social landlords are missing a trick by not thinking in this joined up way. Indeed, this is what a Living Will or Asset Sustainability exercise does; it reveals the value and risks in and around our stock.

The banks and financial institutions may have a lot to answer for, but they can certainly teach us a lot about how to use technology to predict when a mortgage or credit card payment might be missed and how to react quickly to resolve it. Social housing offers a premium solution at a bargain price. We need to borrow the clothes of others, to act in a social manner.

See how you feel about some of these ideas... Instead of taking our tenants through a NOSP process, how about exercising our right to recover debt in the small claims court while keeping people in their homes? For rechargeable repairs, we are notoriously bad at collecting;

why not simply sell these to a factoring organisation at a discount to their value? As for tenants dropping into arrears, we need to nip that behaviour in the bud. It's been proven that areas who have already tested universal credit with housing benefit paid direct have encountered up to 90 per cent arrears on that element. If you think about it, it's easy to predict this being the case. If I accidentally paid £300 into your bank account this month that you were not used to having, would it not tempt you to treat yourself? For that segment of our tenants, could we not automate calls to urge them to let their landlord help them save their home?

Many housing people that Barry and I have suggested this to are clearly horrified. "Our tenants wouldn't answer the phone", "That must contravene data protection", "It's just not cricket, it's not what we do!" Barry would probably reply, "Where's that long grass you want to knock that into again?"

The fact is this approach does work. It does generate incoming appointment requests, and most tenants appreciate anything that helps them to manage their finances.

These methods work and the automation is not expensive, and it's far more cost-effective than sending letters at 93p a time that no one reads at any rate. My Mancunian approach is "ask for a free trial and find out for yourself. Get the suppliers to put their money where their mouth is". A very 'Northern' approach, but that is the best way to check it out. We do need more opportunities to dip our toe in the water, with less of a commitment.

Reward schemes are another interesting area. Should we reward people for doing what they should be doing anyway and could that change behaviour?

I would defy anyone reading this article to state that they are not involved in some type of reward scheme. By that, I mean Tesco Clubcards, fuel cards, M&S and credit card spending points,

Continued on page 6

CAPITA

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We have a very good relationship with Capita, working closely together on the technology solutions across Grand Union.

As we become more sophisticated users we've been able to suggest new areas for the software to be used, and Capita facilitates that for us. It continues to be a very positive experience.

Sue Rice, Business Systems Manager,
Grand Union Housing Group on
Capita's OPENHousing solution



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INSPIRING CHANGE IN SOCIAL HOUSING

Continued from page 4

cashback, Quidco and so on. We all know it changes behaviour. With the universal credit changes, we need every tool we can get in our armoury.

If rewards only helped us with a tenth of our arrears, that would still be a big contribution.

A recent survey I mentioned at the Housing Technology 2015 conference showed that vouchers for local goods

and services was top of the rewards that tenants said they preferred. 92 per cent of one landlord's tenants were positive to the concept. What's better for us as landlords than investing back in our own communities (or franchises, to use Barry's term) and encouraging our residents to do the same?

While Barry and I enjoy a good knock-about act, we both agree on a more serious message; we care about social

housing and the people it supports and we want to use every means at our (and your) disposal to stay relevant in these changing times.

Barry Marlow is a housing consultant with Friends Critical. Tony Smith is an independent IT consultant in the sector and prolific housing blogger as ThatHousingITguy. Both work together in the Get Real Partnership.

FINANCE MANAGEMENT

Orchard BPM at First Wessex

First Wessex 

First Wessex is now using Orchard's business process management (BPM) solution to automate its rent refund process. Users can now request a refund that can be authorised by appropriate members of staff before reaching the finance department for processing.

Although First Wessex had already developed a rent refund workflow which took care of the authorisation aspect, once it reached its finance team, the whole process became manual. This involved data being re-entered and therefore increasing the risk of errors. The housing provider then discovered that there was more that could be done by using automated processes within its Orchard housing management system and OpenAccounts.

Using Orchard's BPM solution, First Wessex created an automatic sundry payment within OpenAccounts. This removed the need for any physical paperwork and automated the

process of adding the transaction to a tenant's rent account, thereby eliminating any duplicated data-entry processes.

Donna Jones, accounts manager, First Wessex, said, "The automation of this process has removed duplication, therefore reducing the notional cost of processing a rent refund. By reducing the manual input, it also removes the risk of data being keyed incorrectly and therefore the need to repeat the process, incurring additional bank charges and causing customer dissatisfaction.

"The resource time released by the automation of rent refunds has enabled the sales and rents team to go ahead with the addition of two further monthly Direct Debit collections which will help our tenants."

Rachel Miller, rents and sales ledger supervisor, First Wessex, said, "We like how the system generates a batch and posts directly to Orchard Housing at the touch of a button. This means the refund shows on the rent account immediately, providing greater accuracy when information is given to the tenant. The purchase ledger team no longer needs to manually input information into OpenAccounts or needs to get another member of the team to check the details, which is saving a lot of time."

INQUILAB PARTNERS WITH SOUTHERN HOUSING FOR FINANCIAL INCLUSION

As the winner of a competitive tendering process, Southern Housing Group is now delivering its financial skills programme to some of Inquilab's tenants in London over the next 15 months.

The programme has so far seen many tenants benefit from the service, which educates them about effective ways to manage their money, especially those

people affected by the government's welfare reforms. Since the start of this year, Southern Housing's financial skills team has saved tenants over £500,000 from housing and other benefit rebates, grants and debt write-offs.

Anabel Palmer, director of social and economic regeneration, Southern Housing Group, said, "This partnership is

the first step in providing our services to other housing providers in England. Our financial skills service has already been very successful with our tenants and helps to educate people about how to better manage their money, while also identifying whether tenants are eligible for rebates, grants and debt write-offs."



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STREAMLINING THE SERVICE CHARGE WITH IT

Matthew Smith, Sales Manager, Grosvenor Systems

Housing providers are starting to bring in service charges for the housing they provide. There are two main drivers for this. First, their business model is changing; it's no longer purely tenants simply paying a weekly or monthly rent.

They are increasingly developing flats and selling them on a leasehold basis while retaining the freehold themselves. This means they have responsibility for managing and maintaining the common parts of the building, so they therefore put service charges in place to cover the cost of doing the work.

Alongside this, however, housing providers are increasingly introducing services charges for their social housing tenants. The rationale is clear; by introducing charges, they get tenants to have a much greater psychological and financial investment in the property. The level of the charge will depend on how well the property is maintained so it is in the tenants' interest to keep the building in a good state.

Unfortunately, the introduction of a service charge does raise some

significant property management challenges for housing providers. Collecting rent is relatively straightforward but when it is combined with the need to manage large volumes of service charge accounts, it becomes much more complex.

There are a raft of shortcomings with the current approach. Housing providers will typically run separate housing and finance systems to manage the rent demands and receipt of money from the tenants. Unfortunately, these systems are not always able to handle service charges.

Landlords generally end up having to download all the relevant expenditure from their finance system once or twice a year and then manually work out in a spreadsheet what share of that expenditure is attributable to each of the tenants. It's a costly, unwieldy and hugely time-consuming exercise.

Fortunately, streamlined IT systems are now available, capable of not just integrating the property management and financial accounting functions but

also of delivering advanced service charge management capabilities. In an ideal scenario, they extract information from the housing provider's finance system, and then combine it with all the relevant tenant, property and service charge schedule information to automatically work out each tenant's share of expenditure.

There are huge benefits to be had: the time expended and costs incurred can be significantly reduced; the analysis process streamlined; and the service charge efficiently delivered and collected. And by reducing the need for manual processes, there are fewer errors and the overall level of risk is reduced. It's a good example of how the delivery of a streamlined and effective IT system can turn an asset property management strategy from an ongoing struggle to almost guaranteed success.

Matthew Smith is the sales manager for Grosvenor Systems.

Peabody plans £1m RoI with Infor

Peabody has upgraded to the latest version of Infor SunSystems in a bid to achieve a return on investment of around £1 million over the next five years. The iPOS purchase-to-pay application is expected to improve efficiency and achieve cost savings by enabling departmental-level procurement, with simplified budget checking when raising orders and reduced support costs.

The five-year £1 million RoI is anticipated to be based on improved coding accuracy, the elimination of duplicated processes, reduced support costs and procurement by department. Further benefits are expected through improved reporting and economies of scale when bringing new subsidiaries on board.

The main Infor SunSystems application currently has 24 users, while the iPOS system is being used by 300 employees across Peabody's operations.

Sonia Ellingham, finance director, Peabody, said, "Peabody is a long-standing user of Infor SunSystems and our upgrade to the latest version, including the iPOS procurement system, means we can work more efficiently. This will help us continue to expand and provide better services to our tenants."



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Capita researches behaviour change to tackle rent arrears

Housing providers and local authorities have been invited by the housing team in Capita's property business to participate in a six-month research programme to test how behavioural science can improve rent collection and reduce rent arrears.

The research will investigate how intervention techniques affect the decisions tenants make. Several organisations will each try a different approach to income collection and managing rent arrears, such as changing the language used in text messages and letters to tenants. This will be measured against a control group in each organisation that will not change the way it currently engages with its tenants.

Each participating organisation will benefit from detailed intelligence on the effectiveness of each approach, allowing them to better manage risk as well as providing a much greater understanding of what type of intervention works best for each tenant. In addition, the overall results of the research will be analysed and practical recommendations that have demonstrated the most impact on tenants' behaviour will be offered to the housing sector.

Anna O'Halloran, associate director of housing, Capita, said, "There are plenty of examples of behaviour change initiatives making a difference. These include

increasing the number of people who register for organ donation through to reducing council tax fraud.

"With this new project, Capita is building on its existing experience in behaviour change campaigns such as improving teachers' engagement in their pensions, and 'nudging' gas consumers to get their gas appliances checked regularly."

Places on the research programme are limited. Housing providers interested in taking part in this project can email anna.o'halloran@capita.co.uk.

CENTRALISED FINANCIALS AT AMICUSHORIZON WITH SAPPHIRE & SUNSYSTEMS

After a series of mergers, acquisitions and business expansion, AmicusHorizon has consolidated all of its financial processes into a single Infor Sunsystems application from Sapphire Systems.

Robert Stewart, business systems manager, AmicusHorizon, said, "There have been a lot of changes within the company, from our original merger of two companies, to smaller amalgamations, restructures and altered financial requirements, but SunSystems has always kept up.

"Now we are one large housing association consolidated around a single system rather than a complex structure of varying financial

solutions. SunSystems is a system we can trust, and one that integrates easily with our other solutions such as HR, payroll and financial tools used for bank reconciliation and debt collection.

"Sapphire has now won two tenders with AmicusHorizon, and it wasn't only selected for financial reasons. We wanted to reward Sapphire's commitment by offering a similar commitment in return; as a result, each tender has been for a three year period, instead of one."



MAGENTA LIVING'S ASSET TEAM WINS 'PROJECT OF THE YEAR'

Magenta Living's asset management team were awarded 'project of the year' at the National Housing Maintenance Forum's recent annual dinner.

The housing provider won the award for its development and implementation of a post-decency investment strategy called Project Save, from which emerged the need for neighbourhood regeneration as well as addressing the challenge of fuel poverty among some tenants.

Project Save was launched to regenerate three of Magenta Living's underperforming neighbourhoods through low-carbon retrofit investment and tenant education. Using a range of investment and neighbourhood initiatives, Magenta Living has blended low carbon retrofit investment with neighbourhood partnership to improve the lives of over 1,000 of its tenants.

Richard Woolfall, assistant director of asset management, Magenta Living, said, "I lead a team of 40, all of whom have made a significant impact on improving standards for our tenants through Project Save. To be awarded this accolade demonstrates our commitment to delivering the best possible maintenance service."



ASSET TRACKING IS NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS, EASTER OR YEAR-END

Karen Conneely, Group Commercial Manager, Real Asset Management

From IT equipment, including laptops and mobile phones, to furniture, fixtures and fittings, assets within housing providers are on the move. It may sound like a scene from Dr. Who, but the reality is that the assets owned by housing providers are not only deployed within the physical boundaries of head offices but increasingly in the wider community.

For those tasked with managing a fixed asset register and ensuring equipment is available on demand, keeping track of these moving items is a critical aspect of day-to-day activity. This means that the traditional annual physical audit of assets is simply no longer good enough.

As Karen Conneely from Real Asset Management suggests, asset tracking is an all year round requirement. In today's highly mobile world, enabling individuals to undertake a process of continual routine asset tracking via mobile apps is going to be the key to retaining visibility and control as they flow in and out of the organisation.

Fluid asset base

Today's society is mobile in so many ways – mobile phones dominate the way we communicate and mobile commerce now outstrips revenue from other channels. While housing providers have developed any number of strategies to support the mobile-enabled workforce and customer base, few have implemented effective policies to control and track the increasingly mobile asset base – an asset base that now moves not only within an organisation but increasingly outside its traditional physical boundaries.

Keeping track of assets used to be a relatively straightforward process, albeit rather boring and grudgingly undertaken. Someone in IT, finance or facilities management would perform a physical audit, typically using a barcode reader, perhaps once a year to provide an up-to-date view of asset statuses and locations. This enabled the finance team to update the balance sheet and IT and facilities management teams to have a better

understanding of asset damage or loss. Times have changed though, and radically. Housing providers are now frequently managing assets or allocating assets to individuals for definite or indefinite periods of time; for example, a new or temporary employee or indeed a tenant. Organisations need to change the way the asset base is considered and managed.

Imposing control

So how are those assets going to be tracked? As housing providers have a continued focus on delivering a better service to tenants, they want to make sure they know what assets they have and that these assets are being used properly.

How will they ensure the equipment is still in place, check for maintenance requirements or manage returns when the equipment is no longer required? Without a way of easily and routinely gaining an up-to-date view of asset location, there is a significant risk of loss and mismanagement.

Routine audit

How can an organisation make the asset audit a routine and simple aspect of day-to-day activity? With the latest generation of mobile apps, housing providers can devolve responsibility for managing and auditing the asset estate away from IT and finance and towards operational areas. The model is compelling; there are no additional hardware costs and low cost software can be downloaded from the Apple store or Android and Windows marketplaces, and works on most smartphone devices. Furthermore the training requirements are minimal since most people already know how to use a smartphone.

Armed with the mobile asset management app, housing staff can undertake the physical audits using the camera on the smartphone to add a photograph and scan barcodes, in the same way the laser scanner on a PDA was used in the past. The difference is that with ubiquitous smartphone

use, an organisation can move away from dedicated equipment and dedicated audit individuals to devolving responsibility more broadly across the organisation. The one-off or annual audit can be replaced by routine, even daily activity undertaken by those people directly interacting with the assets.

Real-time information

Simple and immediate access to up-to-date asset information transforms the way housing providers can use and control a mobile asset base. For example, the IT support person faced with a malfunctioning PC can use the app to log on to the asset tracking software and gain all the information regarding the asset's history and maintenance status immediately, with none of the delay associated with returning to an office in another part of the building. Also, as part of the support process, the interaction with that asset will automatically update the asset register, ensuring that the PC's latest location is also accurate.

Housing providers are operating far more complex, fluid and changing asset bases, and the traditional, once-a-year approach to tracking those assets is no longer enough. Waiting for Christmas or year-end to undertake a one-off audit is not going to work in this mobile environment.

If stakeholders, including the office manager, IT manager and finance manager come together, they can ensure they have a handle on their asset base. By enabling diverse individuals to use the new generation of app-based asset-tracking solutions, housing providers can gain real-time visibility of asset location, value and status. With this information, it is the asset owners and budget holders that are now empowered to make the critical asset-management decisions, ensuring essential control is imposed over this continually changing yet increasingly valuable property.

Karen Conneely is group commercial manager for Real Asset Management.

SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE HOUSING IMPROVES COLLECTIONS WITH RENTSENSE



Mobysoft's RentSense arrears software has helped South Staffordshire Housing achieve its best year for rent collection, having reducing its arrears to just 1.4 per cent in 2014.

Jan Goode, director of customer service, South Staffordshire Housing Association, said, "Given that we knew welfare reform was on the horizon, we started to talk to Mobysoft in 2012 when we were creating our action plan for welfare reform.

"We already knew a lot about our tenants, we had profiled our data, we knew where our under-occupiers were, and we knew who

had not sustained payment arrangements in the past. We were therefore able to tailor the product to what we already knew. This gave us a confidence that our risk-based approach could be supported by RentSense.

"We could have invested in lots of people resources, but we wanted to modernise our approach and let systems drive efficiency. RentSense provides us with a different way of working, and we have saved on additional resources and our rent collection has seen a year-on-year improvement, so there's a tangible financial benefit in terms of income collected."

SOCIAL HOUSING INITIATIVE LAUNCHED BY BACS

Bacs, the not-for-profit organisation behind Direct Debit in the UK, has launched an initiative to encourage tenants to switch to Direct Debit for rental payments.

Open to housing associations, local authorities and ALMOs across the country, Bacs has produced a range of free marketing materials to help promote payment by Direct

Debit, with housing providers benefitting from the long-term advantages of converting their tenants to Direct Debit. As part of the campaign, tenants will be in line for a welcome cash windfall with five centrally-funded prizes of £1,000 worth of Love2shop vouchers up-for-grabs, offering an attractive incentive for people to change the way they pay their rent.

Allpay joins SEC bill payments framework

Housing providers and local authority members of the South East Consortium can now access the latest bill payment systems from Allpay without the need to tender following the launch of a new procurement framework.

SEC has awarded Allpay a place on the framework, allowing its 21 members of housing providers and local authorities to access Allpay's electronic payment services across cash, debit/credit card and direct debit channels. As part of the contract, SEC members can use Allpay's range of payment collection services and contract direct with the supplier for a maximum of seven years.

The services available include access to the UK's two biggest cash collection networks (PayPoint and the Post Office), multiple debit/credit card channels including virtual terminals, online gateways, automated phone, text and mobile app payments, and a fully-managed, cloud-based Direct Debit service, providing 'any day' collections.

Louise Free, procurement manager, South East Consortium, said, "Allpay has a proven track record of delivering bill payment systems to local authorities and housing providers for the last 21 years. In particular, its investment in technology and ability to post collected funds into any bank is a great benefit to our members."



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MEASURING IT AND ACHIEVING VFM

Housing Technology interviewed IT experts from Britannic Technologies, Castle Computer Services, Clearview, DXW and Utilita Energy on how housing providers can make cost savings and achieve value for money through technology, and aligning IT with their core business objectives.

Mapping IT services and their performance to key business objectives

Technology is obviously fundamental to almost all housing providers' operations, but it can often be hard for IT departments to measure and demonstrate the value they provide to the wider organisation. With that in mind, how can you map IT services and their performance to a housing provider's main business objectives?

Castle Computer Services' director of technical sales, Andrew Cruickshank, said, "Most housing providers have a customer service focus within their objectives, to provide a high-quality, cost-effective and efficient service. IT teams should therefore provide the same level of cost effective service, whether accessed in the office or remotely."



"In the case of the cost of statements, repairs appointment letters and paper-based communication, correctly-deployed IT solutions can add real value for money. Furthermore, many repetitive services can be automated to reduce their transaction costs."

Ian Stewart, Account Director, Britannic Technologies

Mark Hobart, the managing director of business intelligence and performance management software supplier Clearview, added, "IT departments should review all business goals and identify how they can help the organisation achieve them, either by 'business as usual' activities or innovation and ideas to support the intended improvements. This may result in new project ideas or the closure of redundant projects, but it will ensure that IT strategy is aligned with the business."

Harry Metcalfe, managing director of web services provider DXW, said, "Perhaps a better question to ask is how do you map IT services and their performance

to the identified needs of tenants, and accordingly, to the needs of the staff serving those tenants? Performance should be measured by examining user satisfaction, though other more basic metrics like up-time and through-put are also clearly useful."

Tracking operational and business performance metrics

However, different business users will have varying views of the business performance metrics they would like to see, alongside the IT department's own traditional metrics. In order for IT departments to demonstrate their value, how should housing providers' IT teams track operational metrics (e.g. system up-time, network utilisation, etc) vs. business performance metrics?

Cruickshank from Castle Computer Services said, "The operational metrics measured must be commensurate with the requirements of the business. The metrics also need to be relevant to the service offered. For example, to measure the business metrics of customer satisfaction, the operational metrics concerning incidents, system availability and SLA achievement would likely be a good starting point. Likewise, to measure the business metrics of employee satisfaction and productivity, the operational metrics of system performance would be one component indicator."

Clearview's Hobart explained, "I think the question that should be asked is whether the business is impacted by IT. Having servers up for 364 days for 24 hours a year is fine, but if those 24 hours of downtime occurred on 48 separate occasions for 30 minutes at 11am on key working days, the business is not going to be very happy. Anecdotal issues, such as the time lag to get information they need via a report or the printer not working when needed, are more likely to be mentioned than 100 per cent email server up-time."

Metcalfe from DXW emphasised the blurring between these two related areas, and said, "I'm not sure that there's much of a distinction between operational and business metrics. Technology is vital to all housing providers, except the very,

very smallest. Technology holds data, defines workflows, facilitates all work that staff undertake, manages compliance, and is vital to a successful audit... at what point does it become the case that the technology is the business? We may not be there quite yet, but that is definitely the direction of travel, especially with residents' contacts increasingly being mediated by technology, such as self-service portals."



"The important thing here is not just what metrics to collect, but what to do with them. Performance metrics should not just be viewed from a backward-looking perspective but also used to spot trends that can be analysed to build predictive indicators."

Andrew Cruickshank, Director of Technical Sales, Castle Computer Services

Reporting to the board

Continuing the theme of identifying the right things to measure and report on, what performance metrics should housing providers' IT teams collect and report to the board/the business?

Cruickshank said, "The really important thing here is not just what metrics to collect and report on, but what to do with the data collected. Performance metrics should not just be viewed from a backward-looking perspective but should also be used to spot trends that can be analysed to build predictive indicators."

Hobart added, "The board is generally only interested in the successful delivery of the organisation's strategic plan. If IT is contributing to the achievement of a strategic goal, then the performance measures relative to that goal should be identified and tracked. There is no point in reporting measures to the board that do not relate to achievement of the organisation's goals."

Bill Bullen, managing director of Utilita Energy, said, "Housing providers should monitor the main metrics such as loads on the systems' services, how many tickets were raised or closed, and how much time was spent on a project. The important thing to identify is where and how the service department is impacted and how long issues take to be resolved, as well as

how much it costs the company in terms of staffing, customer confidence and reputation."

Lowering operational costs

As well as being the fundamental enabler for housing providers' core operations, IT departments also have the ability to lower operational costs throughout the organisation.

Ian Stewart, the account director for Britannic Technologies, said, "The areas that deliver tangible cost savings include new networking technologies to replace expensive legacy networks, SIP to replace ISDN, cloud and virtualisation to replace expensive distributed hardware, web services, and shifting tenants towards lower cost channels and self-service options.

"Also, in the case of the cost of monthly statements, repairs appointment letters and paper-based communication, correctly-deployed IT solutions can add real value for money. Furthermore, many services that are repetitive can be automated to reduce their transaction costs."

Cruickshank said, "What we have seen over a number of years is that sophisticated IT buyers can now work out a cost per user per month, enabling them to look at key metrics to identify the highest costs and take steps to reduce them. For example, emerging technologies have helped to reduce electricity charges and other day-to-day operational costs. These projects have been self-funding over two or three years as the money saved paid for the project itself."

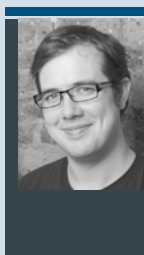


"Having servers up for 364 days for 24 hours a year is fine, but if those 24 hours of downtime were on 48 separate occasions for 30 minutes at 11am on key working days, the business is not going to be very happy."

Mark Hobart, Managing Director, Clearview

Better business performance

Referring the 'easy wins' of mobile working, Cruickshank said, "One of the key measures of business performance is downtime. Traditional downtime for most



"Technology holds data, defines workflows, facilitates all work that staff undertake, manages compliance, and is vital to a successful audit... at what point does it become the case that the technology is the business?"

Harry Metcalfe, Managing Director, DXW

housing staff is the travel time from the office to their properties and then back to the office to complete their tenant records. IT can help improve business performance on a day-to-day basis at a stroke by enabling a mobile workforce where housing officers can log into their main business applications from their tenants properties, provide automatic updates by entering reports directly into the system, answer any queries and undertake tasks in a live environment."

Clearview's Hobart said, "The opportunities to improve the performance of the business are really constrained only by the innovation culture within the organisation. Most IT projects' perceived business benefits at the start seek to deliver on a performance improvement message. However, unless these are quantified and key targets put in place, they may get forgotten."

Metcalfe added, "We need to spend our money more wisely. How much could you save on Microsoft Office if you switched to Office 365, and are you still managing commodity services such as email with on-premise services? Try this experiment: talk to some colleagues and try to get a sense of how many important business functions are carried out in spreadsheets. It's going to be far too many. And some of those spreadsheets contain the same data as some of your systems, so staff are often maintaining the same data twice."

Criteria for new IT projects

Britannic's Stewart said, "One of the key criteria for new IT projects is establishing clear and measurable success criteria at the beginning that can be signed off by the relevant business 'owners' so that you not only have a point of reference throughout the project, but also at the end you can review the tangible benefits achieved."

Cruickshank added, "Business agility is not necessarily about an employee being able to access their desktop using an iPad; it's more about the ability to carry out a function that is relevant to their role, allowing them to achieve set goals and targets."

DXW's Metcalfe said, "The most important criteria for new projects are all human ones, such as user satisfaction, the percentage of first-time fixes and the percentage of calls dropped should be the primary metrics, but user satisfaction should rule above all."

Measuring the VFM of technology

Utilita's Bullen said, "The value of the end results should measure two things. First, the cost to serve the end-users, whether they create internal efficiencies to reduce costs and wastage or improve productivity. Secondly, it's about how the project impacts the housing provider's tenants, either through better service, shorter calls or, ultimately, price."



"The important thing to identify is where and how the service department is impacted and how long issues take to be resolved, as well as how much it costs the company in terms of staffing, customer confidence and reputation."

Bill Bullen, Managing Director, Utilita Energy

Cruickshank concluded, "An increase in productivity, cost savings and enabling employees to have a better work-life balance are how you can measure the value for money of an IT project. It's not always about tangible benefits, so employee morale plays a big part and by embracing mobile technologies, traditional dead time is reduced to a manageable level, resulting in increased productivity and efficiencies."

Housing Technology would like to thank Ian Stewart (Britannic Technologies), Andrew Cruickshank (Castle Computer Services), Mark Hobart (Clearview), Harry Metcalfe (DXW) and Bill Bullen (Utilita Energy) for their editorial contributions to this article.



MEASURING IT – ARE YOU LOOKING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

Chris Deery, Head of ICT, Solihull Community Housing

I have recently been thinking about the sorts of performance measures that get used in the housing sector and the way that IT systems are used to generate management information. I have come to the conclusion that much of that management information probably at best represents something different to what most senior managers and board members believe it means, and at worst is virtually meaningless.

What is an appointment?

For example, I am not convinced that the traditional measures around appointments add any real value. In order to make these measurements meaningful, we need to agree clear definitions of exactly what we mean by an appointment, by a visit and what is or is not an appointable repair. Then having reached that agreement, we mustn't allow things like league tables to convince us that we should soften or change those definitions in order to get into the top quartile of some external benchmarking exercise.

Those of us who have worked in IT for a while are probably more used to the idea of having clear definitions for entities and attributes. I have had long conversations with groups of users who believe that they are all agreed that the organisation needs to store information on appointments, for example. It is only when we start to map out the data structures and build some sort of data model does it become clear that everyone in the room has a slightly different definition of what an appointment is.

To illustrate this point, I have produced four short definitions of entities that will probably be familiar to most people involved in producing management statistics for a housing repairs service. I'm sure that all of you will disagree to some extent with one or more of these definitions:

Appointment – This is an agreed time slot when some work will take place. The agreement can be with a tenant, leaseholder or member of staff. The time

slot can be of any duration; it can be two hours, eight hours, one week or even a month. For internal jobs where a tenant is waiting at home, then a two, four or eight hour appointment slot would probably be appropriate. But for external jobs such as repairing a broken light in a communal area or fixing a broken paving stone then a week or even a month may be an acceptable timeslot. An appointment does not relate to a specific employee. And provided that a suitably-skilled person arrives at a property within the agreed timeslot then the appointment is considered to have been kept.

Visit – This is a member of staff from your organisation arriving at a property within the pre-agreed time slot. The duration of a visit will be dependent on what the staff member finds when he or she arrives on site. If the tenant had originally been told that the work would take two hours and it quickly becomes clear that it will take much more or less time than expected, then a change to the planned duration of the visit should be agreed with the tenant. It does not necessarily mean that a second visit or appointment has to be made. If the staff member leaves the site for any reason (for example to go for lunch, to borrow a specialist tool from the back of a colleague's van or pick-up materials from a store), then provided that the customer is informed why they are leaving and when they will be back, that would be considered to be one visit, even if that visit is the next working day.

Job – This is all the work carried out during the visit, with some of the work having been defined in advance; for example, a plumber may be sent to a property to fix a leaking tap in the bathroom. However, if the plumber was also asked to look at a leaking U-bend in the kitchen while they were on site or if he/she spotted a problem with the toilet cistern and fixed it, then that would also be considered to be part of the same job. If the plumber spotted a problem that he/she couldn't fix either because they didn't have the necessary skills (for example, a problem with the electrical circuit of the central heating system) or

because it needed a non-stock item like a new bath tub, then this would probably be considered a different job and a different visit.

Appointable Job – This is a job for which it is appropriate to agree with the customer a time slot in which the work will take place. Given that the customer can be a tenant, leaseholder or another member of staff and that the duration can be anything from two hours to a month, then I would expect that almost any job could be considered an appointable job. The job could be reactive, for example reported by a tenant or a member of staff in your estates management team, or it could be cyclical such as gas servicing or lift maintenance. In either case, it is appropriate to agree with someone a timeslot when the work is planned to take place and so according to my definitions, almost all (if not all) jobs are appointable.

The reason I am sure that most of the readers will disagree to some extent with my definitions is that if we use these definitions then many of the traditional measures we have used in the housing sector become almost meaningless.

For example, appointments made as a percentage of appointable repairs; I think this measure adds very little value for two reasons. First, if you run this report at the end of every month, it's too late to do anything about it. It would be much better to run a report every morning on the appointments missed the previous day. That way, there may still be time to get back to the tenant or customer and try to quickly sort out the problem. If we run a report for February and then sit down to discuss it at a meeting in March, it could already be five weeks after the tenant had their appointment missed.

My second reason for disliking this measure is that it is often used to present an unrealistically positive vision of a repairs service. For example, a repairs service may report that of all the repairs where it was appropriate or possible to book an appointment, they made and kept 99.5 per cent of

MEASURING IT - ARE YOU LOOKING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

Continued from previous page

appointments. But we don't know how many repairs somebody decided it was not appropriate to make an appointment for. So we don't really know how many of our customers are actually being offered a mutually-agreed appointment slot.

Another measure that I dislike is the percentage of total repairs completed within a target period. For me, the key thing is that you have agreed with the customer when you will do the work and that you keep your promise. This statistic is based on the view that different types of jobs are given different priorities. A dripping hot tap may have a 24-hour priority but a dripping cold tap may have a seven-day priority. In many cases, this leads to unhelpful behaviour. For example, just-in-time scheduling where, when someone reports a problem with a dripping cold tap, the work is scheduled in to happen in six days even if there is a plumber free the next day. The logic often used is that we need to leave some spare slots free tomorrow in case an emergency job comes in. So the cold tap goes unrepaired for six days just in case a hot tap somewhere starts to drip.

I think that every repair should be done at the first mutually-convenient time and it should be as simple as that. I am a big fan of Wrekin Housing Trust who treats all of its day-to-day repairs as emergencies. WHT's website says, "We try to get out to you within two hours, and

our standard is that we will complete the repair the same day, wherever it is possible to do so. We usually complete around 85 per cent of repairs the same day."

Of course, IT professionals don't just think about data in terms of entity definitions, attribute definitions and relationships. We also think about things such as entity life histories and this can also be a useful mental discipline to bring to discussions about management information. For example, let's take the 'number of dwellings without a valid gas safety certificate' statistic. This is a helpful enough report and gas safety is very important. But the weakness of this report is that it is a snap-shot in time.

If the report is run on 30th January, it may well say that 100 per cent of properties have a valid gas certificate. But we don't know if the same is true if we had run the same report on 9th January, 16th January or 23rd January. A more useful report would be one that listed the properties that had not had a valid gas certificate during the previous month and the number of days for which they did not have a valid gas certificate.

During any calendar month, I would expect the numbers to be low and that the number of days that a property was without a valid certificate to be very few. But, if we never see any properties that don't have a valid gas certificate

then that might suggest we are wasting money by doing gas safety tests too often. So perhaps once a year, it might be helpful to have a report that shows the average amount of time between gas certificates being issued and the longest and shortest period that a gas certificate was active. In an ideal world, all gas certificates would be active for exactly 365 days. But that isn't practically possible, so we might see not only that the average gas certificate is active for 310 days before it is replaced by a newer certificate, but also that the shortest period a certificate was active for was just 20 days and the longest was active for 370 days.

This is a rather specific example, but the general point I am making is that sometimes a traditional analysis technique like thinking about entity life cycles can bring real value to an organisation when we look at management information and KPIs. IT professionals bring skills, experience and a unique perspective to high-level discussions about performance measurement and all housing providers would be well advised to consider involving them in discussions about what will be measured and how.

Chris Deery is head of ICT for Solihull Community Housing.

Trimble adds new mobile working tools

Trimble has added new features to its field service management (FSM) solutions to improve workflow and streamline operations for mobile working, specifically around intelligent scheduling of work and an app for real-time information access. The new features are part of Trimble Horizon, a new cloud-based platform for Trimble's FSM solutions.

John Cameron, general manager, Trimble Field Service Management, said, "Empowering workers with the collaborative tools and immediate information they need to manage their day effectively is a necessity when delivering services out in the field. These workers are constantly looking for solutions that give them the instant ability to get to the right place at the right time with the information they need to do their job correctly the first time."

Trimble's Work Management solution now supports multiple crew assignments and equipment bookings, with several

workers assigned to a task for improved efficiency. In addition, a scarce or specific piece of equipment can be booked against a task to help housing providers manage their assets better and improve their rates for 'first-time fixes'.

The FieldMaster Technician app includes the ability for a worker to copy or create a task on-site so they can carry out and account for work immediately. Site history can also be viewed in the app so that the worker can arrive with the necessary knowledge of work previously carried out. Details of each crew member assigned to a task and the tools that have been booked can be viewed, enabling better visibility of resources.

The app can now also send the mobile workers' location from their GPS-enabled devices in real-time so that housing providers can gain a better understanding of the progress of their field operations and despatch work based on workers' accurate locations.

1st Touch launches mobile working for smaller landlords

Smaller housing providers can now access the same mobile working capabilities as their larger counterparts following the launch by 1st Touch of a new package for up to 15 users and three of its mobile working modules.

Along with full implementation and support, qualifying housing providers can choose from over ten individual modules, such as responsive repairs, rent and arrears, stock condition surveys, and gas servicing.

The out-of-the-box package, for housing providers with up to 15 users, includes updates and business process changes every six months, along with managed forms and scheduling. The systems will also be pre-integrated for use with many of the most common housing management systems. The package

also has options for integration with dynamic scheduling tools and the addition of 1st Touch's tenant self-service app.

Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch, said, "There are many smaller housing providers that have the same commitment to quality and value for money as their bigger counterparts so that a cut-down system isn't a viable option.

"They still need a proven fully-featured mobile workforce system, but one that recognises that they are working with fewer users and that they will probably only need up to three modules. This extension of our range is therefore an 'out-of-the-box' solution that allows these organisations to access the same powerful benefits but scaled to suit their needs."

1ST TOUCH GETS HALTON HOUSING MOBILE

As part of its 'digital first' strategy, Halton Housing Trust has introduced 1st Touch mobile software and developed a new tenant self-service app.

Halton Housing originally chose 1st Touch as their mobile technology provider for its responsive repairs operations due to 1st Touch's close integration with the housing provider's Aareon QL housing management system, with information being passed to and from each application in real time.

This proved popular with Halton Housing's maintenance technicians too because they no longer need to return to base as frequently, as their jobs are sent directly to their mobile devices. It is also well suited to rural areas with a poor mobile signal as the system's Smart Airtime feature sends encrypted information in small bursts as soon as there is a signal.

Carole Galsworthy, director of ICT and business improvement, Halton Housing Trust, said, "In addition to our responsive repairs team, we extended 1st Touch mobile working to our arrears management team,

neighbourhood team, tenancy support and our ASBO officers. In all there are currently over 50 mobile users with more to follow as we add other service areas."

One part of Halton Housing's 'digital first' programme is to have 90 per cent of its tenants accessing services online by 2018. To achieve this, Halton Housing decided to build a tenant self-service app with 1st Touch that covered all of its main services and was able to update information in real time both for tenants and in its back office systems.

For example, tenants can request a repair, report anti-social behaviour or estate issues such as graffiti or fly-tipping and it allows them to send in related photos too. They can also order a gas service, a gas repair or report a gas leak. They can also request a move or transfer, check their rent balance and much more.

Galsworthy said, "Our tenant self-service app contains a tremendous amount of information and all the forms that tenants might need to use. Tenants simply enter the relevant information and the system logs a contact in our



CRM system and kicks off the appropriate workflow to the relevant person and confirms to the tenant that their query is being dealt with.

"One of the main benefits of 1st Touch is that all the information entered by tenants is automatically updated in Aareon QL in real time. This level of delivery and seamless integration with Aareon QL is a real plus."

Halton Housing said that the main aim of introducing the tenant app and other aspects of its 'digital first' strategy was to ensure that welfare reform changes and particularly the introduction of universal credit would have a net-nil impact on it in terms of costs and resources. For example, the self-service app allows Halton Housing to free up resources

that can be re-directed and re-focused to delivering additional support to its most vulnerable tenants.

Galsworthy said, "Our 'digital first' programme had a number of key objectives, but it was a blank piece of paper in terms of designing a tenant app. 1st Touch helped us to design and build this and it is a first-rate system that will not only transform what we do but will also add a new dimension to the tenant experience we deliver.

"1st Touch took the time to listen and understand what we needed and worked with us on delivering a highly effective solution which is all the more impressive because of the real time integration to Aareon QL and the automation of CRM contacts and colleague workflows."

A man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie, is smiling and talking on a black mobile phone. He is looking slightly to the left. The background is a soft-focus office interior with light-colored walls and a window with blinds.

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HAS THE DIGITAL PEN RUN OUT OF INK?

Glyn Cunnah, Head of Business Development, Footprint Solutions

Glyn Cunnah, head of business development at Footprint Solutions, discusses why the digital pen is now missing the mark for mobile workers.

Any organisation that employs a mobile workforce is looking for two things: cost effectiveness and remote access to real-time information. For decades, the digital pen has enhanced the standard of service for staff operating in the field in sectors such as healthcare, utilities and facilities management. It streamlined data capture for mobile workers, reducing the frustrating delays associated with paper trails and slow back-office processing.

Despite an initial flourish for market-leading manufacturers such as Anoto, technical advances have bolstered new mobile technologies and uncovered the significant cost of distributing and running digital pens across an entire mobile workforce.

So how can organisations improve efficiency and remote information capture without incurring significant upfront costs? With a history of providing both digital pens and web-based platforms to our customers, I have come to the conclusion that tablet solutions are fast becoming worthy successors and an indispensable upgrade for mobile workers.

Making the move to digital

The fundamental objective for digital pens and tablet-based solutions is to make mobile reporting more efficient and cost effective. Historically, mobile workers have been reliant on filling out paperwork by hand before scanning them to retain a digital copy, a process that is both time consuming and expensive.

The digital pen works by capturing handwriting using a small in-built camera, which is then transmitted to head office within seconds. The digital pen is suitable for forms that need to be left on-site with the client, or where a paper receipt (i.e. carbon copy) of a form is required for a client record.

By the same token, tablet-based solutions convert paper forms into digital copies, thereby eliminating paper processes, and

the associated cost and time consumption, for maximum efficiency. As a mobile worker, this technology allows you to collect and send data almost instantly, actively reducing administration overheads in scanning and manual data-input.

While both solutions offer mobile capabilities, the real test lies in the overall cost of implementing and running the solutions on a larger-scale; this is where tablet-based platforms beat digital pens.

When the ink runs dry

If you are looking for the most cost effective and accurate solution for mobile workers, then it is time to reconsider your association with the digital pen.

For the purposes of illustrating the point, did you know that it costs around £290,000 to supply and run 40 digital pens over three years? In fact, printing charges alone can reach over £260,000 during the same time frame. Although the digital pen has been proven to streamline paper processes and their associated costs, it does incur unexpected weighty expenses. A typical NCR pad (specially designed for the digital pen to understand the location of written material on the page) costs almost £30 for 100 pages. Therefore, in order for one worker to complete 30 jobs a day for a month, the necessary NCR pads will typically set a company back around £180.

There are issues with accuracy too. Handwriting recognition can often fall short, requiring data validation later on. Mistakes have to be corrected soon after as the user has no real-time visibility of the conversion. So, writing in a rush or with a scribbled form can affect the efficiency of the service. In addition, any photo attachments or barcodes cannot be pre-populated on the form, meaning the worker has to return to base to retrieve all relevant information.

Why tablets are the best medicine

Given the measures most organisations are employing to save money, it is important to identify areas for improvement without affecting the standard of service given to customers. This is where the tablet remedies the digital pen's weaknesses.

In terms of cost effectiveness, tablet-based digital forms eliminate the need for expensive printing. Instead, a one-off set-up and registration cost is all that is needed for a tablet solution, with no recurring costs associated with the product. Indeed, the service boasts a 79 per cent cost reduction over paper-based reporting, which would typically equate to a saving of £56,000 per year; a significant margin for any company.

It is a smarter product too. Data capture is both accurate and intelligent, with no need for later verification. Pre-populated forms can be sent to workers in the field for a more up-to-date service, and a database of templates can be accessed anywhere without prior notice, removing the need to postpone or lengthen the process.

Unlike the digital pen, media can be easily attached to a document, with workers being sent or adding photos and voice memos to specific forms. Also, with the advantages of the tablet, calculations are automatic for data collection forms such as travel and expense claims. In short, the tablet addresses the issues raised by the digital pen while also multiplying the benefits for the mobile workforce.

Tablet platforms can also be easily updated to ensure your customers are getting the most advanced solutions on the market for complete visibility and in some cases increased safety and security, with the added benefit of lone-worker protection.

The tablet is mightier than the pen

Migrating away from the digital pen in favour of a tablet-based solution is the best decision for companies that have employees who spend a considerable amount of time interacting with customers in the community. Web and app-based platforms can make light work of mobile working processes, such as data capture, payment collection and service enquiries. So while the digital pen may dry, the tablet offers endless possibilities.

Glyn Cunnah is head of business development at Footprint Solutions.

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ONGO FILLS THE VOID WITH KIRONA

Ongo, the partnership organisation set up by North Lincolnshire Homes, is now using Kirona's Project Planner module to manage its voids work alongside its existing Xmbrace DRS scheduling software to allocate work to its responsive repairs team.

John Smith, Head of Voids, North Lincolnshire Homes, said, "Project Planner is unique in the way it breaks down complex maintenance projects, such as void properties, into manageable chunks of work that are allocated to the appropriate operatives."

"Crucially, it manages the work sequentially, so that a piece of work is only allocated when any dependent tasks have been completed. For example, a new electric shower being fitted in a void property might need both an electrician and a plumber to install it. Project Planner ensures that the plumber isn't allocated their job until the electrician has done theirs, and if that electrician has been delayed then Xmbrace DRS dynamically pushes the plumber's job back as well."

This process is the same for each property, so Ongo can see in a single screen the progress of all voids projects. This not



only gives the voids team greater visibility of the progression of work, but also provides greater scope for work planner and management intervention where necessary.

Margaret Slingsby, performance and productivity manager, North Lincolnshire Homes, said, "It's been a long journey getting our systems up and running, but the support from Kirona, 1st Touch and our own IT team to get this project live has been fantastic."

"We have also worked with other members of the Kirona and 1st Touch user groups, such as Together Group, to ensure that we have shared knowledge on the project to assist the recent developments by Kirona."

SHAREPOINT BEATS MOBILE COVERAGE FOR COASTLINE



Coastline Housing in Cornwall is using Microsoft SharePoint to combat the difficulties of very patchy mobile coverage across its rural properties.

Justin Floyd, mobile solutions architect, Coastline Housing, said, "Unreliable coverage in Cornwall has been our biggest barrier to mobile working to date. Coverage is patchy at best, even with the help of BT wi-fi spots. At the same time, Coastline needs to push forward with mobile working because, given our very rural spread, it has the potential to really change the way we work."

Coastline's initial foray into mobile working involved getting its responsive

repairs workforce online with PDAs during 2010; this resulted in savings of around £8,000 per year and a change in its working culture.

The housing provider is now embedding mobile working across its front-line housing teams, with the roll-out of 40 Windows tablets with SharePoint installed on them, designed to give employees the same IT capabilities in the field as they would have at their desks.

Floyd said, "SharePoint Workspace allows us to complete forms and edit documents offline, which will automatically synchronise with the network once the device comes back into signal. In addition, we're developing workflows so that works-order emails, customer letters and tasks can be automatically generated when front-line workers fill in relevant fields on a form at, for example, a void property inspection."

"We're still finding our way and continuing to discover the potential of this software. Of course, part of the sticking point with mobile working comes down to the cultural change for staff. However, it's

starting to really gather pace as our front-line workers realise that they can save time and effort by updating information on their devices when they are at a customer's property rather than having to return to the office to type up their notes."

With more data being gathered electronically, Coastline's analytical capabilities are increasing. Floyd said, "With paper forms, data is static or requires a lot of manual processing to make it useful. With electronic forms, we can now quickly do analysis, measure performance and even plot trends via GIS."

Louise Beard, director of housing and care, Coastline Housing, said, "Over the next five years, we will be growing our stock by around 15 per cent thanks to an investment of £131 million to deliver one of the largest affordable housing programmes in Cornwall. However, we don't want workloads for our staff to increase by that same percentage, so mobile working will be key to keeping pace with our expansion without losing that all important customer-service provided by our front-line teams."

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Looking Local app for Dudley Council

A mobile app that allows Dudley Council's residents to quickly and easily report problems, such as fly-tipping, potholes and faulty streetlights, and lets tenants submit requests for housing repairs has kicked off 2015 by passing a landmark 1,000 downloads. Since the app went live in November 2014, more than 550 street issues and over 250 housing repairs have been reported using the app.

Commissioned as part of Dudley Council's 'Love Your Community' campaign, the app enables residents to send in pictures of problems, including roads in need of repair, dumped rubbish, faulty street lights and graffiti, which are

then forwarded to the relevant council department. The app pinpoints the exact location of the report to aid a speedy resolution. Dudley's housing tenants can also send in pictures relating to housing repairs.

The Dudley Council mobile app, built by public sector-owned technology developer Looking Local, is available free to local residents and tenants on iOS and Android smartphones.

Guy Giles, director, Looking Local, said, "We are delighted that Dudley's app has been taken up with such enthusiasm by local residents. In common with all our clients, we worked with the council to develop a versatile, bespoke solution

based, in this case, on our MyLandlord platform. Our aim is to create a product that residents find easy to navigate and convenient to use, and that cuts down on time-consuming and costly face-to-face and telephone contact with council staff."

Stuart Turner, responsible for finance and ICT, Dudley Council, said, "The Looking Local app is already popular with our residents because it offers quick and easy access to council services, and a convenient route for reporting street issues and requesting housing repairs. It also allows our customer advisers to maximise the time they have to help more residents."

SCHEDULING SUCCESS FOR SOUTHERN HOUSING WITH ONESERVE

Southern Maintenance Services, part of Southern Housing Group, is using Oneserve to schedule and manage maintenance appointments by ensuring that its staff are in the right place, at the right time, and with the right skills to complete each repair.

Southern Maintenance Services was created to bring previously outsourced works back in-house at Southern Housing in order to have more control of its repairs operations. The housing group said that repairs were the biggest motivator from a tenant's point of view so a successful maintenance service was crucial to achieving excellent levels of tenant satisfaction.

Carl Dewey, maintenance services director, Southern Maintenance Services, said, "What customers remember from a 'wow' perspective is that they phoned up, we attended quickly, we turned up when we said we would, we fixed the repair because we had the parts in the van

and, once we'd finished, a service call was received to check everything was ok."

The company reported that it had saved around £200,000 within eight months of bringing its repair service in-house, and that end-to-end repairs were now down to eight days, compared with a sector average of around 13 days. During one reporting period, 460 tenants were surveyed and 95 per cent rated the service 'eight or above' while 86 per cent rated it '10 out of 10'. In addition, the company has achieved a 100 per cent rate for capturing levels of tenant satisfaction with its service by using Oneserve to identify the best time to call tenants for feedback.

North West Leicestershire goes mobile

Oneserve has helped North West Leicestershire District Council to modernise its DLO and move to mobile working. Since its introduction, the council mobile workers have completed 15 per cent more jobs per week and reduced its reliance on external contractors.

The Oneserve scheduling solution enables NWLDC to let its operatives make more on-site decisions, showing good faith in their judgment. This means operatives can manage their time more effectively and offer a service based on their own knowledge of the areas and tenants they serve. Furthermore, in an area plagued by lots of mobile black-spots, Oneserve's offline working enables workers to still view what's coming up, even when a mobile signal isn't available.

The council can now offer more responsive services, based on customers' needs and changing priorities, and there is less duplication, with job updates inputted once, without the need for multiple form-filling. There is also now greater automation, with inbuilt sign-offs giving added reassurance to customers that jobs have been completed alongside the use of cameras on the workers' mobile devices to build a photographic library of completed works.

David Moxon, financial systems team leader, North West Leicestershire District Council, said, "Since adopting Oneserve and mobile working, we completed 15 per cent more jobs in the first four weeks. It is about us being able to do more of the jobs ourselves and reducing our reliance on our SOR [schedule of rates] contractor."

One Housing chooses Oneserve for in-house maintenance

One Housing has chosen Oneserve to support the creation of One Direct, its in-house maintenance service.

Ceri Theobald, operations director, One Housing, said, "The partnership with Oneserve is an extremely important part of our creation of One Direct. We are already scoping out how the Oneserve system can be implemented to help improve efficiency on our voids operations, which has already been brought in-house."

INVU UPGRADES BOURNVILLE'S EDM



Bournville Village Trust has upgraded its Invu electronic document management system to improve workflows between its departments and provide faster and more accurate responses to tenants' queries.

The upgrade process included hundreds of thousands of documents, including

tenancy agreements, invoices, internal repayments, architectural drawings and scanned information being transferred in just one week.

Carl Fowler, head of IT, Bournville Village Trust, said, "Before using Invu, we filed everything away manually. The decision to choose to work with Invu was very clear because the team knows our business structure in great detail and was on-board from day one with what we wanted to achieve with an EDM.

"Invu is always thinking ahead to future proof its technology and incorporate the latest technological developments. However, it gets the balance right because we are never pressurised to adopt new systems early."

James Hoare, IT networking manager, Bournville Village Trust, said, "We liked the fact that we could work with Invu to design our own processes, set our own rules and have greater search capabilities with no extra bolt-on costs for bespoke requirements. Invu also involved end-users from the very start, which has made user adoption far easier.

Bournville's employees are now using the new Invu system on a daily basis and cutting their time to save and search important files by many hours per month. The upgrade has enabled greater control over how documents are stored, better visibility for audits, improved retention policy for different departments and a simplified data structure.

ORBIT'S DI SUCCESS

Working in partnership with CommunityUK, Orbit Group has installed free wi-fi in 20 of its sheltered and supported schemes across the country to help its tenants get online. Since then, over 400 users have accessed the service more than 21,000 times in the first six months.

After the six-month pilot, Orbit reported that social return on investment analysis suggests that the project had generated £2.90 of social value for every £1 spent.

Following the success of the pilot, Orbit is continuing to work with CommunityUK to extend the service into more schemes and is developing a 'whole

organisation' approach to commissioning internet access services to support long-term planning and to reach more tenants.

Tim Dumbleton, digital inclusion project manager, Orbit Group, said, "It is through partnerships with companies such as CommunityUK that we can make significant steps

towards tackling digital exclusion.

"We are also working with other housing providers, as part of the Connected Housing Initiative, to explore opportunities to work collaboratively to make broadband provision affordable, accessible and sustainable for tenants."

SCC wins DWP hosting contract for universal credit

SCC has just won a two-year hosting contract from the Department for Work and Pensions for its internal universal credit infrastructure. The DWP will maintain intelligence, development and operational support for the applications and operating system suite, while G-Cloud partner SCC will provide and support the infrastructure.

The SCC infrastructure is intended to ensure that the intelligence around universal credit is delivered internally, with the underlying infrastructure provided securely and outside any

of the traditional systems integrators involved with the deployment of universal credit.

SCC will deliver infrastructure-as-a-service (IaaS) using its Sentinel platform, as well as service desk support, monitoring and DR capabilities, and secure site-to-site communications. The long-term plan is for SCC to integrate the universal credit service with other core DWP applications using the Public Services Network.



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Habinteg continues i-stay@home trial

Habinteg Housing in south London is leading the pan-European i-stay@home project in the UK with partners from France, Germany, Holland and Belgium.

Its disabled tenants are testing high-tech solutions aimed at making everyday tasks easier for older and disabled people. 180 tenants across Europe are trying out a range of gadgets and judging their usefulness, reliability and value for money in supporting independent living. Habinteg's Nunhead tenants are among only 22 people in the UK taking part in the trial.

Robotic vacuum cleaners, motion sensors for detecting falls, wireless cameras for identifying visitors at the front door, wireless light switches, energy monitors and online apps for banking and shopping are all being tested by tenants.

One of Habinteg's tenants said, "You can't put a price on the energy it saves. To keep getting up and getting up, I've no energy left to enjoy myself. The sockets save me bending over. The lights also operate the light at the front door, so it saves me walking all the way down the passage."

Trials have taken place over a 10-month period, with full analysis of the i-stay@home project provided by all European partners early in 2015.



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."

NOTTINGHAM COMMUNITY HOUSING ASSOCIATION UNLOCKS ACCESS WITH INTRATONE

Nottingham Community Housing Association is one of the first UK housing providers to use a new, hi-tech door-entry system. Tenants in 20 flats at a converted warehouse can now lock and unlock their doors remotely with their smartphones.

Using technology from Intratone, the aim of the pilot project is to improve access to each flat and increase security for tenants. The system uses GSM technology, enabling tenants to control access to their homes via their landline or mobile phone without the need for additional cabling. The whole system is monitored over a web platform, making lost keys, access for carers, contractors or visitors, or conversely, restricting access, all things of the past.

For example, NCHA's maintenance team looks after nearly 300 properties,



making the process of granting access to properties a difficult physical task. This becomes time-consuming and expensive as traffic increases when factoring in maintenance contractors, carers or tenants losing keys. Now visitors can call the caretaker on his mobile, who can then let them in remotely.

The Intratone system was installed by Salt Network Consulting, NCHA's preferred contractor for the last 10 years. Tim Salt, the company's managing director, said, "Intratone is a unique and cost effective system that enabled us to install a reliable intercom system with minimal manpower and remote maintenance, making the job more cost effective for everyone involved."

"At first, we were assisted on-site by the Intratone team, in order to grasp the new system's setup process. Although unconventional, we now regard this product as a welcome addition to our portfolio of products and would consider this system as a great advantage to our other clients who have to fit a new system to an existing building, especially if they don't have any cabling or it is out-of-date or broken."

Academic report cites ongoing risks of UC

A report from Sheffield Hallam University suggests that housing providers could face huge financial problems because their IT systems simply aren't ready for the introduction of universal credit, with some housing providers unable to access even the most basic data on their tenants.

The independent study, carried out by the university on behalf of Housing Partners, found that nearly nine out of 10 housing providers don't have access to the data they need to manage the introduction of direct payments to tenants. Many are also struggling to identify individual vulnerable tenants who should perhaps not move onto direct payments or will need extensive support.

The survey of 172 housing providers by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam also found housing providers don't have the necessary technology to deal with the policy change.

This follows earlier research by the university and the Department for Work and Pensions that suggested that tenant arrears were almost five times higher using the new benefit system set to be established nationally by 2017.

Professor David Robinson from Sheffield Hallam University, said, "These figures show that housing providers are bracing themselves for financial difficulties following the introduction of universal credit. It will have a major effect on their operations and more than one-third consider direct payments to be a threat to their financial viability.

"Virtually all landlords (98 per cent) expect to see an increase in rent arrears, one-third expect direct payments to affect their relationship with institutional lenders, and a quarter consider universal credit to be a threat to their new-build programmes."

Only 20 per cent of housing providers said that staff could easily access information about the vulnerabilities or support needs of tenants, and over half of them said that their IT systems were limiting their ability to prepare for universal credit.

Richard Blundell, CEO, Housing Partners, said, "The implementation of direct payments represents a huge shift for all housing providers, and what this study shows is how vital it will be to have the right data and, more importantly, be able to use it.

"With the survey showing that housing providers estimate that 26 per cent of tenants will struggle to pay their rent even with maximum support, the need to have the right information and the right technology to take advantage of it is even clearer."

CHI BRINGS AFFORDABLE IT TO TENANTS



The Connected Housing Initiative has just launched a new web resource to help housing providers find the right hardware, software and web connectivity solutions for their tenants.

The CHI is a collaboration of 13 housing providers working with the Government Digital Service, National Housing Federation and digital skills provider, Digital Unite. Their aim is to ensure more affordable, sustainable and accessible IT kit and connectivity for all tenants.

Over the past few months, CHI members have been collaborating with IT providers to help shape hardware and internet

solutions that are better suited for tenants, for example with shorter contracts and lower monthly costs.

Sophie McKechnie from Hyde Group and chair of the Connected Housing Initiative said, "With the ubiquity of digital services and with the advent of universal credit, having affordable and flexible internet access is vital if tenants are to get online.

"We want tenants to have more choices in the market and we therefore want IT and internet companies to better understand and access the huge business opportunity that tenants represent."



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LOOKING LOCAL SUPPORTS UNIVERSAL CREDIT SELF-SERVICE



In the light of the introduction of universal credit, Looking Local is helping more than 100 housing providers and local authorities to publish key information about benefits and jobs online, at the same as giving the widest possible digital access to claimants who are moving across to the new benefits system.

Looking Local's solutions provide front-line housing and council staff with tools to encourage self-service by claimants, offer financial advice, and help people find employment. The solutions give claimants access to a universal credit eligibility checker, the Money Advice Service and jobs information on the

widest range of digital devices, including smartphone apps, mobile, social media, Sky and Virgin television, games consoles and online.

The ability for claimants to log their time spent job-hunting, which is one of the basic requirements of new claimants' commitments, is also available on Looking Local's mobile offering and smartphone apps.

Looking Local reported that 885,000 jobs were searched for across its channels in 2014, and that it had received more than 150,000 visits to its universal credit pages. So far this year, around 80,000 jobs have been searched for, alongside

21,200 pages of universal credit content. In addition, content from The Money Advice Service has generated 26,000 page views.

Guy Giles, managing director, Looking Local, said, "With such a pivotal piece of welfare reform coming on-stream nationwide, it is important that housing providers and local councils can provide claimants with up-to-date, high-quality information on universal credit and associated advice while minimising their contact management costs. Our solutions are therefore designed to help tenants self-serve in a way that is most convenient to them."

INFRASTRUCTURE

ITS TECHNOLOGY GROUP EXPANDS CITYSERVE BROADBAND NETWORK

25 East Manchester businesses have signed up to broadband services from ITS Technology Group on its CityServe network using Broadband Delivery UK funding, a government voucher scheme designed to get 95 per cent of the UK connected to superfast broadband by 2017. The CityServe network was originally set up for local social housing tenants.

ITS acquired the ailing CityServe infrastructure in June 2014, and has since breathed new life into it by implementing a series of upgrades. This not only means that the existing customer base of housing tenants is now benefiting from a faster, more reliable service, but it has also opened up the network to local



businesses struggling with connectivity that wasn't fit for purpose, with no alternative other than an expensive dedicated line.

Roy Shelton, CEO, ITS Technology Group, said, "When we bought CityServe, our

number one priority was to upgrade the network so that existing customers had the peace of mind of a cost effective, fast and reliable service. It was always our intention to expand the offering to local businesses, and as an IT services specialist, we can now offer them telephony, IT managed services and CCTV."

CityServe's wireless broadband covers a 25 square-kilometre area which includes 48,000 homes. It was developed by Manchester City Council from a government-led 'wired up communities' initiative in 2001 and has established itself as one of the largest wireless networks of its kind in Europe.

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PEAKS & PLAINS AND STAFFORDSHIRE HOUSING SHARE BACK-UP SERVICES WITH KEYLOGIC

Neighbouring housing providers, Peaks & Plains Housing Trust in Macclesfield and Staffordshire Housing Group in Stoke-on-Trent, have joined forces to share back-up services with help from Keylogic.

Instead of paying for separate back-up services from suppliers that were charging over £25,000 per year, the two housing providers decided to share resources, services and recovery space to create the perfect solution that would not only eliminate these costs but also improve the speed of recovery and increase the number of recovery points.

Working with Keylogic, they embarked on a project that involved implementing the Dell AppAssure software across each corporate network, with data replicated between the two sites in almost real-time. They also added a local on-site backup facility that could be used in the event of a partial loss of infrastructure or data.

Simon Penaluna, assistant director of ICT, Peaks & Plains Housing Trust, said, "This project has been a great success. Not only has it brought a real commercial benefit by reducing costs for both organisations to the point where it paid for itself before the end of the first year, but we have also found that working so

closely with Staffordshire Housing has allowed us to build relationships to work together on other projects in future."

Darren Penny, ICT service delivery manager, Staffordshire Housing Association, said, "After the loss of our parent company's head office due to a fire and having to go through a real DR scenario, the importance of finding a good partner for this project was key. This collaborative project has not only given us assurances over the integrity of our information, it has also met key business objectives such as value for money."

Pinac! wins £480,000 MPLS deal with WM Housing



(L-R) Rob Bardwell and Maria Alvarez from Pinac! with Ian Tinsley and Neil Crew from WM Housing Group

WM Housing Group has appointed Pinac! Solutions to implement and manage a new MPLS network in a three-year deal worth £480,000.

The new network is being created in order to deal with the effects of new housing associations joining the group's federal structure, each with their own legacy systems; at present, 900 users now access the existing network from 40 locations.

Ian Tinsley, director of ICT, WM Housing Group, said, "As we've grown, we've created a mix-and-match network, but our existing legacy data management systems don't give us the flexibility and cost-effectiveness needed to work in an increasingly large and complex environment, with growing demand for capacity as we move towards mobile working, video conferencing and much greater use of multi-media.

"The capacity of the new network will increase 10 fold, meaning end users can expect to see a huge improvement in the systems' performance. Our internet access will be scalable and if another association joins the group, we can literally plug them in."

WM Housing reported that it expects Pinac!'s new MPLS network to save them around £25,000 per year once it goes live in July 2015. Angus Groom, executive director of corporate services, WM Housing Group, said, "We were looking for a strategic IT partner to help us grow. Pinac! has promised a fully managed and monitored service that will be available around the clock, 365 days of the year."

XLPRINT SOFTWARE ENTERS THE HOUSING SECTOR

XLPrint Software has announced its intention to have a dedicated focus on the UK social housing sector based around its mail consolidation service, PARIS Mail. XLPrint reported that they anticipated annual mailing cost savings of around 20 per cent.

The company said that the service is delivered on a shared reward basis, making it self-funding and financially risk-free. The PARIS Mail service automates

the intelligent creation, consolidation and distribution of transactional documents and correspondence.

The XLPrint documents are data driven so the format and content can be created in a way that makes them specifically relevant to the recipient. For example, housing providers using the service would no longer need to produce and send a Direct Debit mandate to their existing Direct Debit payers or no longer

need to buy expensive pre-printed stationery.

The service includes merge and sort capabilities so that created correspondence can be produced in a way that enables multiple items for the same recipient to fill a single envelope, such as merging rent statements for houses with rent statements for garages.

DISASTER RECOVERY BLIND-SPOT

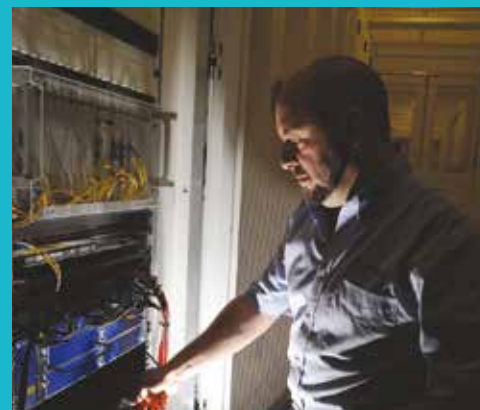
A survey from Timico has suggested that disaster recovery is a bit of a blind-spot for IT managers, with as many as one in eight of those surveyed having either never tested their DR plans or having no idea exactly when they were last tested.

Over a third of the IT managers surveyed were only "reasonably confident" that their disaster recovery plan would deliver in the event of a genuine crisis, and just nine per cent said that they reviewed and updated recovery plans once a month or more.

Tom Moores, sales director for cloud and hosting, Timico, said, "IT managers are renowned for having a lot on their plate, but when things go wrong, there's nowhere to hide. DR plans are effectively worthless if they are not tested, reviewed and updated; from burst water pipes to natural disasters and simple human error, the threat of downtime is more likely than many people realise.

"DR is an essential component of IT management, but in the past it has always been seen as a bit of a headache, with businesses having to invest heavily in duplicate equipment before they could be 100 per cent confident and carry out thorough testing.

"With Disaster Recovery as a Service (DRaaS), testing can be conducted



with no disruption to the production environment. By using a cloud platform as a back-up in the event of major disruption, precious data is protected almost instantaneously until a business is ready to fail back to its primary site."



FIRST CHOICE HOMES' HOSTED HELPDESK FROM HOUSE-ON-THE-HILL

First Choice Homes Oldham's ICT service delivery manager, David Gorman, describes the process of choosing and implementing House-on-the-Hill's hosted helpdesk software.

SupportDesk was recommended by a colleague who had seen it demonstrated at a conference. We were searching for a new service desk software tool that had the ability to be either hosted or in-house.

The product met our requirements to support incident, problem, and request processes, and be simple to use. It had a full set of map-able processes and offered a self-service portal. A flexible knowledge base and configuration management database were also important features.

The availability of both cloud and on-site deployment models means that our IT team can focus on ensuring that SupportDesk does exactly what they want, rather than being confined by the deployment option. The fact that we could start with a simple solution to get things going quickly and then add extra functionality was a very important part of our plan.

We opted for a cloud-based service desk with a monthly subscription. This is not only good value for money but it also meant there was no need for the technical installation of SupportDesk. The

software is hosted by House-on-the-Hill so maintenance, upgrades and hardware are all taken care of.

A knowledgeable consultant from House-on-the-Hill was allocated to the project from start to finish, and she worked alongside us to understand our requirements, our processes and help build them into the system. SupportDesk is very configurable so we could create unique workflows, SLAs and email triggers to make our processes as automated and customer-focused as possible.

We support around 450 end users and log around 40 calls per day, so we have a very busy service desk for a small organisation, and we operate a flexible staff structure with people covering multiple roles. SupportDesk's customisability in terms of editing log-in roles and access privileges has therefore proved a huge advantage; each team member can see and do exactly what they need to.

A typical day-to-day call logged on our helpdesk might be about a remote worker who can't access a system via a mobile device. The customer logs the call by telephone, then the call is logged at the service desk, taking down customer and device information and issue details. The SLA is then automatically set by the system

based on the call type and service, and because SupportDesk operates a multiple-tier breach system, the SLA then automatically populates response, warning and action times.

Emails are sent at pre-defined stages of the call. An email is automatically generated and sent to the customer confirming the call details and reference number and the call is then allocated to an engineer. We have also integrated an auto-emailing function based on the selection of an external partner organisation; if the engineer discovers that a partner is needed, then the partner is automatically notified by email. Then, once the call has been resolved, an email is sent to the customer confirming details of the call and explaining the resolution.

We are developing a cultural change through the business around how customers interact with ICT by using SupportDesk to enable self-service. The self-service portal will now be used as an option rather than just telephone and email for customers to log issues, access FAQs and track their calls. We have also integrated case-based reasoning, so that possible solutions pop up based on keywords typed by users.

David Gorman is ICT service delivery manager for First Choice Homes Oldham.

The benefits of information governance

Sir – Many people regard information governance as another potential compliance issue; something that drains resources as you try to jump through legislative and regulatory hoops. If that's your position, then perhaps you are failing to see the potential of information governance as a means to drive change, increase efficiency and just generally do things differently.

Safeguarding and security have long been concerns of the IT sector but information governance is not restricted to protecting assets because it offers the opportunity to undertake a holistic review of approaches and activities throughout an organisation. At its core, information governance is about using hardware and software to promote efficiency, drive value for money and introduce sustainable behaviours.

At Longhurst Group, we're starting with high-volume administrative processes, such as our corporate HR process. We have a versatile, flexible resource available in Sharepoint which allows us to write our own workflows that respond to our particular needs and collaboration that allows more joined up working. It's because of this that we've been able to bring our board members online and encourage them to have paper-less meetings. Print reduction is one of our primary aims and as part of our commitment to cost-saving, we're re-tendering our print contracts with targets to reduce the volume of print.

Changing behaviour is a key part of implementing information governance, and good communications kick-start the process of cultural change. As information governance embeds into an organisation, new ways to communicate emerge. For example we're moving an increasing number of workflows, audits and other collaborative functions onto our staff intranet as well as promoting Microsoft Lync as a great alternative to exchanging e-mails. There will also be a shift towards using technology to enhance our working experience, not police it!

We're also reviewing our approach to mobile hardware and are now issuing more devices to end-users. The digitalisation of tenant services and improvements to mobile working are driving our asset management strategy and influencing large-scale contract negotiations such as mobile phone contracts.

Of course, one reassuring benefit of firm information governance is that your ICT infrastructure is safeguarded by the right level of security. However, staying protected is simply a matter of good housekeeping whereas information governance can help mitigate severe risks, support value for money principles and generate real organisational change.

Darren Ryland
Head of ICT, Longhurst Group

IT must create value, not just cost savings

Sir – As housing providers prepare for the onset of universal credit, many are naturally looking at the IT solutions on the market to help them achieve the efficiencies they'll need to succeed in a tougher fiscal environment.

As a technology supplier to the sector, you might expect me to support this approach, but I would argue that an IT solution needs to offer more than just cost efficiencies to prove itself of any real value in the long term.

IT is often seen as a way to cut overheads, but in fact, customers tell us that when it comes to collecting rent arrears, for example, they want to use technology to free up the human resources they have and refocus them, rather than lose them. If income specialists can spend more time on pastoral care with tenants, the rent arrears level soon decreases, while tenant communication and satisfaction dramatically increase. This can only be a positive outcome for both parties.

According to a recent report, over 90 per cent of housing providers questioned said that they are very or fairly concerned about the capability of their tenants to cope with monthly budgeting and the additional resources needed to support tenants with the transition to universal credit.*

The only way to tackle these issues is to find an IT solution that can deliver benefits far beyond pleasing the balance sheet. Communication will be the key to implementing the changes smoothly and any piece of software that can speed up back-office processes in order to free up front line staff will be worth the investment.

As one customer recently said, "It's about managing the resources we've got effectively, as we can't keep 'magic-ing' up more income managers!"

If you're considering investing in a new IT solution, don't just measure it by cost alone, look at the broader business benefits it could deliver.

Derek Steele
CEO, Mobysoft

* National Housing Federation: Welfare reform impact assessment, January 2015

Check your business continuity plans

Sir – Inspired by the Scottish referendum and motivated by the upcoming General Election, local authorities are seeking greater regional autonomy and regional devolution is becoming an increasingly higher priority on politicians' agendas. However, with new opportunities on the horizon, local authorities must not forget their business continuity plans to minimise their exposure to new risks.

Business continuity management is a legal requirement for all local authorities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The duty requires all local authorities to maintain plans to respond to emergencies and provide advice and assistance to businesses and voluntary organisations in relation to business continuity. It also requires them to make provisions for ensuring that their ordinary functions can be maintained.

Last month, South Oxfordshire District Council's business continuity plans were put under serious pressure after a suspected arson attack set the council building and two other properties alight. It was essential that, at that moment in time, their business continuity plan was put into place to "make sure the effects on the most important services are kept to a minimum."

If your premises were to suffer a fire, what emergency response planning do you have in place? Protecting the future of an organisation, whatever the size, has to be the number one priority. A crisis could happen at any time.

Mike Osborne
Head of Business Continuity, Phoenix

Why standards matter

This article was first published in the July 2009 issue of Housing Technology. Given the current interest in making data easier to move between applications (see Editor's Notes on page two), we decided it would be worthwhile to republish the article verbatim.

Given that the focus of the Housing Technology Standards is to 'simplify the exchange of data between housing providers' internal business applications and with external organisations and contractors', we asked the housing providers to explain their current problems with the exchange of data between both internal and external applications, and how they thought standards might alleviate those problems. Our thanks to Affinity Sutton, Amicus Horizon, LHA-ASRA, Notting Hill Housing Group, Orbit Group, Peabody, and Richmond Housing Partnership for their contributions.

Moving data

Data is hard to transfer between applications. Common data held in different systems is usually stored in different formats and structures, requiring a variety of approaches to extract and transfer the data, resulting in inconsistencies and error-prone processes. Hardly surprising, but we have heard of many instances where it's very difficult to exchange data between different systems from the same technology supplier.

Our contributors explained that data standards would simplify data transfer between both internal systems, such as between a housing provider's HMS and CRM systems, and with external partners and contractors. This would reduce costs, as it would remove the need to use either in-house staff or external suppliers' resources, while improving flexibility, delivering near real-time data sharing, better reporting and greater data accuracy.

Your interface or mine?

The existing situation has resulted in a plethora of interfaces to transfer data between applications. Aside from the cost of such interfaces, whether developed in-house or bought from suppliers, our contributors said that most interfaces rarely work first time and need to be modified. Then, once the interfaces have

been developed, it's difficult to identify business-critical interfaces, understand interface dependencies and be clear about the data being transferred.

Data standards should mean that interfaces work first time without further modifications and that fewer separate interfaces would be required, with a consequent reduction in costs and better data transfer.

Touching the wider world

The majority of housing providers' internal data needs to be made available, in one form or another, to either other housing providers, regulators or external contractors. At the same time, they need to receive data from the same groups, such as local authorities' housing benefit details and Choice Based Lettings, to update and populate their internal applications.

Key external processes, such as NROSH and RSR returns, need to be automated, and the typical mixture of data formats and structures within most housing providers' systems simply can't support such automation at the moment. Furthermore, we expect the TSA's requirements to become more stringent and technology-based, so now is the time to start demonstrating the sector's technological and business maturity.

Counting the cost

While the cost of dealing with the lack of data integration between applications is relevant, it isn't a significant problem. However, data standards would result in cost savings, at the same time as reducing risk, lowering transaction costs and saving time.

Helping tenants

While tenants are very unlikely to be aware of the consequences of the existing lack of data standards, it is clear that the ability to pull data from disparate applications from across an organisation, and potentially including external contractors and LAs, would mean that the delivery of tenant services would be more imaginative, more accurate and more personalised.

Real choice

The impression from our contributors is that most housing providers feel tied to their existing application suppliers, particularly in the core areas of housing,

asset and financial management and CRM, despite the fact that different systems from the same supplier (see above) are often unable to exchange data without additional interfaces.

Data standards would open up the procurement process and make it easier and faster to implement true best-of-breed applications for each business area.

Taking stock

A common theme from our contributors was that, not surprisingly, LSVTs, mergers and stock rationalisations all present massive problems in terms of migrating property and tenant data between organisations.

Data standards would mean that, at the most basic level, the majority of property and tenant data could be relatively seamlessly transferred between housing organisations. It would be unrealistic to think that the process could be entirely automated but we think that data standards would remove a very significant amount of work from the process, particularly from the receiving organisation, and minimise the disruption to tenants during the transfer process.

In summary, it is clear that standards for the interchange of data between housing providers' various business applications would have both immediate effects on their day-to-day operations and widespread impact on their long-term, strategic planning.

To find out more or put forward your views on data standards, please email standards@housing-technology.com.

Standards manifesto

The Housing Technology Standards Board will drive the creation and adoption of open standards to improve and to simplify the exchange of data between housing providers' internal business applications and with external organisations and contractors.

By removing the complexity of transferring data between different internal and external applications and reducing IT switching costs, the adoption of HTS v1.0 will streamline business processes to deliver better services to tenants, improve communications with external suppliers, accelerate internal decisions, and improve external reporting.

NEW 'IN-DEPTH 2015' EVENTS & SUPPLEMENTS FROM HOUSING TECHNOLOGY

IN-DEPTH | 2015



Following the success of our Housing Technology 2015 conference this March, we are very pleased to announce that we have just launched a brand new series of one-day events and magazine supplements (see www.housing-technology.com/indepth for more information).

Known as 'In-Depth 2015', this rolling series of events and

supplements will enable us to look in more detail at specific business and technology areas. The topics currently planned for inclusion are:

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE & ANALYTICS
(19 May, BT Tower, London)

MOBILE WORKING & COLLABORATION
(date & location tbc)

OMNI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS
(date & location tbc)

HOUSING & ASSET MANAGEMENT
(date & location tbc)

TELECARE
(date & location tbc)

In-Depth Supplements

Alongside our new series of events, we are also introducing our In-Depth 2015 series of special supplements, each providing detailed coverage of a specific technology area, with editorial contributions from selected housing providers and IT suppliers.

The topics for the In-Depth 2015 series of supplements will mirror those of the event series and are based on the results of Housing Technology's recent detailed survey of housing providers' future IT plans and how they plan to spend their technology budgets.

Please see www.housing-technology.com/indepth for more information or email indepth@housingtechnology.com.

COMMUNITY METERING AT CITYWEST HOMES



Thanks to a £100,000 innovation award from the National Grid Energy Efficiency Innovation Award scheme, CityWest Homes has teamed up with utility metering company Energy Assets to install 'community metering' across 840 properties in eight London tower blocks. These will access cheaper electricity without tenants needing to cut back on comfort.

Work started in January 2015 on the first tower block in Pimlico, with 150 flats being fitted with new smart meters connected by Ethernet so that bulk electricity can be bought at a single industrial meter. Tenants are expected to save around 15 per cent on their fuel bills because the community meters allow electricity suppliers to provide beneficial tariffs to CityWest Homes, thereby reducing energy charges to tenants.

CityWest Homes is also using Energy Assets' Z-Lynk load-switching and energy-control technology. This will switch on storage heaters and hot water cylinders remotely when electricity is at its cheapest.

Tim Harris, chief executive, CityWest Homes, said, "Our priority is to reduce bills for our tenants, while ensuring there is no change to their comfort. Electric heating tends to be more expensive and we expect to change that.

"By using new technology to bulk-buy electricity, we can optimise the use of intermittent sources such as offshore wind, as well as earn an income by helping to stabilise the grid. This will help to reduce the cost of heating and provide the best value for money for our tenants."

SELF-SERVICE REPORTING AT WHG WITH CLEARVIEW



WHG has implemented Clearview's business intelligence and reporting solution for self-service reporting across the organisation.

During 2014, the housing provider decided that it needed better access to information in order to support its management team by providing actionable insight at all levels. Like many large housing providers, WHG has an evolving data landscape and a requirement to report and understand information from a variety of sources in ways that make sense to the viewer, particular at senior levels.

The Clearview software was piloted during the last quarter of 2014 to establish that it could deliver what WHG needed. This initial work focused on the development of a corporate dashboard, the result of which was extremely well received by the senior management team. A roll out of the software to all of WHG has now begun.



Paul Trainor, Head of Communications & Business Improvement WHG

Paul Trainor, head of communications and business improvement, WHG, said, "Following the trial, we have started work on a suite of executive dashboards to be implemented from April 2015. These will be focused at first around group KPIs and visibility of the 'big ticket' projects underpinning goals in our corporate plan.

"As we go on, we will add additional levels of sophistication, enabling drill-down to support the needs of each director and their teams. Our aim is to put the tools in the hands of the people who can make the biggest impact."

Cheltenham Borough Homes opts for Clearview



Cheltenham Borough Homes is using Clearview software to support the delivery of its business plan.

Adam Waller, business support manager, Cheltenham Borough Homes, said, "We bought the Clearview software because the business needed a more robust, accessible and flexible

way of using our data; we needed to link the information we had to our broader strategic plan.

"There was also a need to reduce our reliance on a number of off-the-shelf software packages to manage and monitor our business data because they were taking too much time to administer and didn't really lend themselves to a more strategic or thematic way of managing the activities in our plans."

Cheltenham Borough Homes is now in the process of building its business data into Clearview's strategy and performance software.

Waller said, "We can already see that we will benefit from savings in terms of administrative time, which will enable us to make better use of our data. The Clearview software will support a more open and accessible environment, helping with the delivery of our new business plan to 2025 by linking people's objectives to the company's aims."

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DXW RALLIES SMEs AROUND G-CLOUD AND DS2

In February around 25 SME G-Cloud providers, led by web services provider DXW, united in their dismay at the government's latest agile procurement initiative, Digital Services 2 (DS2) and lobbied for change. They felt that the framework, in theory designed to enable the public sector to engage with agile service providers to build digital services efficiently and cost effectively, was deeply flawed.

The issue began in January 2015 when Crown Commercial Services, which owns both G-Cloud and the Digital Services Framework, removed agile development from G-Cloud 6, and briefly threatened to remove it from G-Cloud 5 too, thereby making DSF the only procurement route for agile digital service delivery.

Under DS2, roles are siloed by capability. There are seven capabilities and when invitations to tender are issued through the framework, each capability is responded to individually, and the buyer can choose to award each capability to any responding supplier that meets its requirements. What makes this difficult is that development, design, user research and delivery management all sit within different capabilities. The majority of SMEs supplying these services will have staff in all of those roles, and generally those people will work together as a team on most projects.

However, the prospect of winning one capability in a project but no others is not workable for most SMEs. For example, extracting a set of developers and no other staff is not commercially viable; without the support of their developer colleagues, the designers, user researchers and delivery managers in the company are unlikely to be able to take on other work. A company that won a tender, but only in one capability, might therefore not be able to take on the work. Given that risk, taking the time to respond with a good tender would become harder to justify.

This approach also ignored the fact that good companies are more than the sum of their parts; DXW pointed out that running a good digital agency isn't just about the people you have, it's also about culture, processes and shared experiences. The framework makes naïve assumptions about what individuals can achieve when removed from their normal teams and processes, and ignores the commercial realities that suppliers face which, all other problems aside, would make it difficult to obtain services in this way.

In January, Harry Metcalfe, the managing director of DXW, called on other similarly-affected G-Cloud suppliers to unite in condemning DS2. It started with a lone blog on February 4th and within hours the #gcloudforever

debate began. Some 25 technology companies joined in with numerous blogs and tweets calling for DS2 to be scrapped and for agile procurement via G-Cloud to stay. On February 10th at London's thinkcloudforgovernment conference, Chris Chant, who set up the original G-Cloud framework in 2011, also criticised DS2. Metcalfe continued the pressure with a series of blogs and met Stephen Allott, the Crown Representative for SMEs, as well as Tony Singleton and his team at Government Digital Services and shadow MPs.

On February 18th Tony Singleton announced on the GDS blog that it was setting up a multi-disciplinary team, made up of the right people from GDS, CCS and Treasury Solicitors (TSol). He said, "We will listen to private-sector experts, many of whom have recently written about the shortcomings of the current Digital Services framework, to build a DS3 that works for all parties."

Metcalfe said, "It's a great start but not everyone has really invested in changing the current model. And some of the changes that are needed will be hard to make. But as G-Cloud 1 showed, change is possible. As suppliers and buyers we need to be vigilant, we need to be involved, and we need to be resolute. 2015 should be the year that rubbish IT procurement is shown the door."

BOARDPAD BRINGS PAPER-LESS MEETINGS TO WM HOUSING

WM Housing is now using software from Boardpad for electronic meeting packs for its variety of board meetings, committee meetings and group executive meetings.

After unsuccessfully trialling and manually creating PDF versions of meeting packs and distributing them to board members, WM Housing realised that it needed a more refined and intuitive solution to compile papers and distribute them to meetings.

Across its group operations, WM Housing holds up to 30 board meetings, 15 committee meetings and 25 group executive meetings each year. On average, the board packs for these meetings can

range from 80-200 pages, with 20 to 30 agenda items, taking considerable administrative time to produce.

Mike Platts, information security and technical administrator, WM Housing Group, said, "Although we looked at other options, BoardPad came highly recommended and, once it was presented to executives and senior board members, we felt that this product was the one to go with.

"Boardpad is also a substantial security improvement over our earlier attempts at electronic board paper distribution. ICSA Boardroom Apps take the security of data very seriously and we feel that

our board data is now much more secure and controlled than before."

The initial trial of BoardPad was at a group board meeting at the end of 2013. The feedback from that meeting alone resulted in the proposed rollout time period for BoardPad being significantly reduced, with a view to getting iPads issued across all boards within the group as soon as possible.

Andy Stephens, governance officer, WM Housing Group, said, "Support from the ICSA Boardroom Apps team has been first class. At one stage, we received a response to a question after 10.30 in the evening."

GIS IN HOUSING WITH CADCORP

Cadcorp sponsored two recent GIS and mapping events in London and Manchester, with speakers from L&Q, Greenfields Community Housing, Wakefield & District Housing and Emapsite.



Graham Naggs from L&Q explained how GIS can be easily funded on the back of the cost savings made in negotiating grounds maintenance contracts alone, but he also pointed out how the same spatial data captured to support procurement in grounds maintenance can also be used for other purposes, with the result that L&Q is now using the same technology and data to ensure fair

and transparent service charging for its residents, allocating housing patches to its officers and providing geographic profiles of its tenants.

Greenfields Community Housing's James Elms reported that it was using GIS to provide a graphical and geographical interface to its asset and housing management systems from Orchard and Keystone. As a result, its customer service centre now has a fast and intuitive map-based way to locate and retrieve key data from those applications. Greenfields is also using GIS in tree condition surveys and for the management of street lighting. Its plans for the future include using GIS to identify clusters of tenants in rent arrears, properties in need of repair, and in the planning and execution of house condition surveys.

Paul Wake from Wakefield & District Housing talked about how to implement a successful GIS, based on its experience of implementing its second GIS. He



explained how WDH had managed to implement the new system in just nine weeks, including data transfer and training. Over 1,000 WDH employees now have access to the mapping system, with a resulting saving of £13,000 per year.

Lee Williams from data provisioning company Emapsite gave a quick tour of the different data sources available to housing providers. These include free and open data, as well as licensed data from Ordnance Survey and other providers. He stressed the importance of understanding what you want to do with the data so that you avoid the cost of over-specification and the limitations of under-specification.

IDOX REVAMPS TRAFFORD'S BUSINESS APPLICATIONS

Trafford Council went live earlier this year with a range of business solutions from Idox designed to replace its aging legacy systems for planning, building control, land charges and gazetteers.

The council reported that one of the challenges when migrating from one system to another wasn't the volume of data in its legacy system but ensuring that all of the existing records and their associated data fields could be transferred. This helped ensure that the new system was able to meet the expectations of users, from day one.

Rob Haslam, head of planning services, Trafford Council, said, "We worked with Idox to ensure that the transfer was seamless and that when the project went live, there was no impact on our users. Idox helped us map virtually every field in our old system to the new Idox system so that the data transferred successfully the first time."



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HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2015 IN PICTURES

Housing Technology 2015 took place at the beginning of March at the Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry and attracted over 370 people during the two days of the conference.

Housing Technology would like to thank all of the guests, speakers, sponsors and exhibitors for making the event such

a valuable forum for exchanging ideas, gaining business intelligence and making new connections.

Details about the Housing Technology 2016 conference will be published as soon as we have confirmed the date and the venue.

JUST A NOTE OF THANKS AND CONGRATULATIONS FOR A VERY ENJOYABLE AND USEFUL TWO DAYS. I THOUGHT IT WAS YOUR MOST IMPRESSIVE EVENT YET.

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WM
HOUSING



JUST TO SAY THANKS FOR WHAT I THOUGHT WAS A VERY SUCCESSFUL CONFERENCE.

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GREAT EVENT! THE TEAM WERE REALLY HAPPY WITH THE QUALITY OF DELEGATES AND WE HAD SOME GREAT CONVERSATIONS.

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SEEING CCTV IN A NEW LIGHT

James Wickes, CEO, Cloudview

James Wickes, CEO of Cloudview, looks at the impact cloud technology is having on traditional CCTV for housing providers.

As both observers and the observed, we all have a 'view' on what CCTV is. We'll have seen the grainy, frame-by-frame footage, often used as evidence against criminal or disruptive behaviour. We'll have noticed the cumbersome cameras mounted on poles around estates. We may be aware of the dedicated control rooms with multiple monitors where events are observed and recorded. In fact, many people working for housing providers will have direct experience of working with CCTV and will understand its drawbacks in terms of practicality, quality, accessibility and cost.

But many of these perceptions of traditional CCTV are being outpaced by new technology. CCTV itself is an outdated collective phrase for a type of static and cumbersome visual monitoring and recording. Today, this has been transformed thanks to the power and flexibility of the internet and cloud computing.

Creating a new age of visual surveillance

Thanks to the cloud, the way we use computers has undergone a quiet revolution; computing power can now be bought in the same way as electricity, gas and water, paying only for what we use, when we use it.

A good example of this is the ability to capture and record large quantities of visual data to remote servers from cameras that are connected to the internet. It means CCTV has given way to 'visual surveillance as a service' or 'VSaaS'. The architecture, functionality and economics of these are entirely different to CCTV, enabling VSaaS systems to be deployed in circumstances where the use of regular CCTV would be regarded as impractical, intrusive, uneconomic or even impossible.

It means housing providers can now enjoy the benefits of systems that are secure, flexible and easy to install. What's more, they give much wider access to stakeholders via smartphone, tablet, laptop or PC. These networks of cameras bear as much relation to traditional CCTV

as old-fashioned 'brick' mobile phones do to today's smartphones.

The bottom line for housing providers is that there are now systems that do far more than simply tick a very expensive box on their checklist of strategies to combat anti-social activity. Cloud-based VSaaS offers unprecedented scalability, with the ability to add or remove cameras to and from a network without having to buy expensive upgrades of local facilities.

Secure and privacy remain paramount. Data security continues to be a vital issue for housing providers. And recording to a local device, as with traditional CCTV, is a process fraught with risk. Footage can be viewed on a monitor that is directly connected to these devices, so in practice the data can be accessed and viewed by anyone with the right technical knowledge. Regular CCTV systems are also vulnerable to hacking over the internet. All of which leaves them open to abuse, and often in breach of data protection legislation.

State-of-the-art VSaaS systems, such as Cloudview's, ensure that all recording and data management infrastructure is remote. So, unlike traditional CCTV, data cannot be physically accessed by unauthorised individuals and there is no risk of equipment theft, data theft or unsanctioned data deletion.

Cutting-edge VSaaS networks ensure that data passed from connected cameras to cloud-based servers is always encrypted, making it almost impossible to access it without the right permissions. If the internet connection fails, visual data will be recorded locally and then uploaded to cloud-based servers when the connection returns.

Privacy issues go hand-in-hand with data protection and these concerns are vital in environments where there is minute-by-minute interaction with people's lives. With traditional CCTV, there is no way to assure the privacy of personal, sensitive visual data as cameras can be physically accessed. In contrast, cloud-based VSaaS systems can be configured to accommodate multiple individuals and locations, all with varied privacy needs.

Access to this visual data can be granted by creating authorised and auditable client accounts. These accounts can in turn be accessed using internet-enabled devices such as smartphones and tablets. VSaaS systems are so flexible that the images and areas captured on camera can also be redacted to protect highly-personal data. In cases of anti-social behaviour, this level of access and flexibility can be a powerful tool, where vital footage can not only be recorded as evidence, but acted on in real-time.

Ready-to-go reliability

The hardware-heavy nature of traditional CCTV has long been one of its drawbacks. VSaaS systems are not hampered by the same restraints. Cameras can be quickly installed, switched on and switched off for multiple clients at multiple sites. With a system such as Cloudview's, even existing CCTV systems can be upgraded to a cloud-based one.

Perhaps the most impressive advantage of VSaaS systems is that they can be set up without the need for expensive technical help or long-term infrastructure support. It's simply a matter of plug in and play. Upgrades and bug fixes are implemented automatically so new hardware is not needed to keep up with new advances in technology.

And, while we can't speak for other providers, the Cloudview network and system has been built to prevent the slightest possibility of data loss. The service is designed to achieve 99.99999999 per cent durability and 99.99 per cent availability; compare that to traditional CCTV where footage is often lost, corrupted or simply unfathomable.

A more powerful tool for tackling anti-social behaviour

Housing providers around the country are already making the most of the new opportunities presented by cloud-based VSaaS. And while we may still be stuck with the phrase 'CCTV' for a while, we should make no mistake that the new generation of visual surveillance systems can massively improve our ability to deal with anti-social behaviour.

James Wickes is CEO of Cloudview

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