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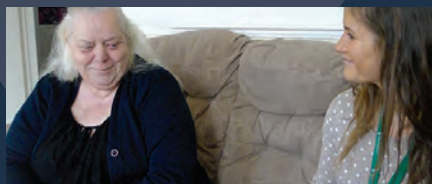
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EDITOR'S NOTES

General Election - Universal credit rolls on
The Conservative's victory in the General Election and in particular the retention of Iain Duncan Smith as Work and Pensions Secretary should be interpreted by housing providers as a clear indication that the widespread roll-out of universal credit is definitely going to happen, despite some misgivings over its technical implementation and its effect on housing providers' incomes and cash flows.

As we have covered in past issues of Housing Technology, while neither the actual details of how universal credit is implemented nor the nuances of its IT platform are of direct relevance to most housing providers, the results of the 'pathfinder' pilots and numerous pieces of research all provide very clear evidence that (surprise, surprise) rent arrears increase when the housing component of benefits is paid direct to the claimants.

Regardless of your view of the political and sociological merits (or otherwise) of universal credit, it seems pretty certain that every housing provider will have higher rent arrears.

As John Doyle from the Housing Contact Company explains on page 14, "For the first time in recent memory, housing providers will have to compete for the bulk of their rental income. This won't be a challenge just for the income team, but one that needs to be faced by the entire organisation... it's even worse when you consider that your new competitors, such as BrightHouse or Wonga or even the regular utility companies, will have their data sorted and be acting on it quickly."

Most housing providers still have time (but not long) to work out how they are going to deal with increased arrears. And rather than simply increasing the number of income collections staff, the smart thing to do is to use technology and automation to streamline how you deal with the majority of arrears cases so that human intervention is only required for the most extreme or complex cases.

Housing Technology goes In-Depth
Our new 'In-Depth 2015' series of events and special supplements have become a reality with our 'mobile working and collaboration' event at the BT Tower in London on 19th May and the 'cloud-based CCTV and surveillance' supplement distributed with the printed version of Housing Technology (you can download a PDF version of the supplement from **www.housing-technology.com/indepth).**

The topics for future 'In-Depth 2015' events and supplements include business intelligence and analytics, omni-channel communications, housing and asset management, and telecare. That said, we are very open to suggestions for other topics for the events and supplements. If you would like to be involved in any of the events or supplements (as a speaker, editorial contributor, sponsor, etc), please email **indepth@ housing-technology.com** or contact us direct using the details below.

EVENTS

- **MOBILE WORKING & COLLABORATION**
- **OMNI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS**
- **HOUSING & ASSET MANAGEMENT**
- **BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE & ANALYTICS**
- **TELECARE**

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SECTIONS

ONESERVE LAUNCHES CLOUD-BASED BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE & ANALYTICS

Field service management software provider Oneserve has unveiled a new cloud-based business intelligence and analytics platform to enable housing providers to quickly and easily extract and interrogate their data to help them make better decisions about their service delivery.

Oneserve said that housing providers will find that real-time data from the field will enable them to make quicker decisions about their mobile workers, reduce travel time and improve utilisation rates simply by having better visibility and understanding about their workforce.

The analytics platform is the result of a pilot project that Oneserve ran with Sky Network Services, responsible for implementing, maintaining and upgrading the networks that support Sky's domestic broadband and talk services. SNS has a team of highly-skilled engineers servicing thousands of sites across the UK; covering thousands of miles a week, SNS was looking for a way to maximise the time spent on the job and increase its rates for first-time fixes.

Adam Thompson, managing director, Oneserve, said, "We offer the same functionality as many of the more established providers but at a fraction of the cost and with a much faster implementation time."

BOARDPACKS APP AT WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING

Watford Community Housing Trust is using BoardPacks software on iPads to make its board papers easier to use and reduce the administrative burden and cost of preparing them.

Julie Robinson, director of resources, Watford Community Housing Trust, said, "BoardPacks is simple to use, and board members that were already familiar with Apple products found it very easy to make the switch to the paperless system.

"Using the BoardPacks app on iPads has allowed users to make notes and thoroughly discuss agenda items anywhere, anytime more easily, instead of having to try and find or reorder the board papers."

Following a trial with a small number of board members, the BoardPacks app is now being used for all of the housing provider's board meetings.

Robinson said, "At first, we were worried that the app would affect decision making, but this has not been a problem at all – in fact it has helped decision making. The BoardPacks software has delivered efficiency to our processes, paper savings, and now we don't have to worry about the confidentiality of our board papers."

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

IT'S NOT JUST MOBILE

Aidan Dunphy Head of Product Strategy, Orchard Information Systems

In 2007 I visited the InMotion conference organised by Xmbrace. This was an impressive event, with everyone who was anyone in the mobile working space present. Back then, the talk was almost exclusively concerned with maintenance field force automation; repairs operatives in vans, GPS, how to introduce scheduling, rugged devices and promises of integration with housing management and other corporate systems.

This is understandable, given that the vast majority of field work was of this type, and roles such as housing officer were seen as primarily officebased, albeit with a regular if not daily need to get out and about. It was relatively easy to make a case to invest in mobile technology to support maintenance work, although there were still many organisations for whom such solutions had yet to be seriously considered.

Innovation stalled

Over the following years, innovative housing providers and suppliers began to create mobile working solutions for other staff who regularly work in the field. Solutions for specific needs such as setting up rent payment arrangements or managing ASB cases appeared. So in 2012 when I visited the InMotion event again, I was hoping and expecting to see that the industry had broadened its view of mobile working; disappointingly, the conference was again almost entirely dominated by the maintenance agenda, and nothing much seemed to have moved on despite the availability of new solutions. It seemed that it was still only the innovators doing anything different.

Then welfare reform happened, and tenants came under unforeseen increased financial pressure. The knock-on effects for housing providers were threats to their income and increased management costs, coming at the same time that they themselves were suffering from the effects of the recession.

Broader functionality

This rapidly escalated the need for access to a much broader scope of information and functionality in the field, for other classes of worker. Housing providers suddenly realised that they needed to get much closer to their tenants; they needed to identify not just the tenants of a property but all of the occupants, educate and reassure them about benefit changes and begin to think about and try to predict their challenges and behaviours in much more detail. The new harsher reality of operating in the sector has also led some to a new focus on commercial activities, or even a wholesale change of ethos.

Of course, a sudden and urgent emerging market need will be exploited by many suppliers. Just as in 2007 when the market was awash with mobile repairs solutions unproven in the social housing sector, there is now a plethora of mobile apps promising to meet your every need using their 'flexible and totally customisable forms designer', and again the promise of 'full integration with any housing management system'. You can decide for yourself how much work needs to be done with a 'flexible forms designer' to get to a fit-for-purpose and robust solution for business-critical processes, or what 'full integration' means, especially if it's claimed for 'any' HMS.

So where will this lead? The term 'mobile working' sounds anachronistic to the ears of many working in other sectors; it hasn't been 'a thing' for a number of years, if ever; devices improved and became cheaper, people discovered that they could do things on the move and commercial necessity did the rest. I don't remember there being any specific turning point or project to implement mobile working in Orchard, it just happened.

This is the way we suppliers should think about it; instead of trying to work out what 'mobile working' solutions the market needs, we need to go back to square one and instead research what life is like working the sector now, and try to predict how it will develop over the next few years. Orchard has taken this approach and has commissioned independent academic research to shape its strategy. This project has a name containing references to 'mobile', but in truth it represents the future of the housing management system. Perhaps the question should actually be "What does 'Working 2.0' look like?"

The 'coffee-shop office'

To answer this in broad terms, it will require solutions that support what we would expect working in any other field, integrated with the specific information and tools required for working in housing. Solutions should make use of the additional opportunities that mobile technology offers, such as location awareness, communications and the ability to capture digital information at the front-line. It must use the 'coffee-shop office' paradigm, where we catch up with tasks during an unexpected spare hour. The days of having to go back to an office somewhere to 'feed the beast' must come to an end.

When it comes to choosing your IT solutions for this challenge, as ever you have many choices. There is a swarm of vendors who have been quick to develop standalone, siloed apps or forms-based toolkits; alternatively, you can look to your core suppliers to see if they're able to provide a joined-up, strategic response to the challenge, based on thinking that reaches beyond here-and-now commercial exploitation.

Aidan Dunphy is head of product strategy at Orchard Information Systems.

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First Choice Homes Oldham takes ROCC's Uniclass HMS

First Choice Homes Oldham has recently taken on ROCC Uniclass, combined with Kirona DRS, Web Booking Manager and Mobile, for its repairs and maintenance operations.

The implementation follows FCHO's plans to increase the number of contracts carried out by its team of around 100 workers. Each year, the team currently complete around 33,000 responsive repairs and void repairs to around 1,300 properties.

FCHO wanted an easier way of co-ordinating all these contracts and operatives as there was a lack of information regarding job costing and control over jobs being delivered by operatives.

Regarding the tender and contract process, Siobhan McCoy, property care general manager, First Choice Homes Oldham, said, "We were looking for full visibility, we wanted to manage our income and workload efficiently, we wanted to reduce travel time for our operatives and we wanted to understand more about our costs and save money where we could. We were also keen to achieve more 'first-time fixes' for repairs."

ROCC won the contract and the implementation phase took ten months, with the system going live in June 2014. ROCC led the project to install its Uniclass job-costing system and Kirona's DRS Scheduling and Mobile DRS.

McCoy said, "We were particularly impressed that workers who had never received jobs on a mobile device before got to grips with the system immediately. We noticed improvements in productivity straight away."

MAGENTA LIVING'S PAPER-LESS MEETINGS WITH BOARDPAD

Magenta Living is now using BoardPad software to replace paper-based board packs for its senior executives' meetings.

The housing provider holds a combination of 30 board and committee meetings each year, with 16 board packs needed for each meeting. The collation of paper board packs was taking Magenta's administration team two days to produce for each meeting. After unsuccessfully trialling other paperless meeting options, Magenta looked into more sophisticated solutions to host their meetings that would allow directors to simply annotate documents as well as being highly secure and portable.

Colin Arnold, head of ICT, Magenta Living, said, "We needed a solution where we could monitor the information that board members received. We were also having issues getting papers out to board members in a timely manner and wanted to relieve that pressure from the administration team.

"Our IT team led the selection and implementation of BoardPad as we had a number of security concerns, including being sure that documents could be archived and deleted and that they couldn't be copied."

The implementation of BoardPad has been well-received by Magenta's board. Members have enjoyed being able to download and access past and present papers instantly, wherever they are, without having to contact Magenta's administrative team.

Arnold said, "Since introducing BoardPad, even our most technophobic board directors have never looked back. They like the simplicity and overall user experience."

The administrative team at Magenta reported that they were pleased with the speed, efficiency and accuracy that BoardPad has brought to their operations. Connect's intuitive functionality has allowed administrators to quickly change agenda items, re-upload reports and publish last-minute documents.

Jessica Sutton, board administrator, Magenta Living, said, "We find it so much easier to drag and drop all of our documents into BoardPad; in the past we used software that required us to individually PDF and upload each document. We no longer print papers which means we don't spend days compiling paper packs.

"We can also log on and check when board directors have accessed their papers so we're much more aware of our board's contribution to meetings in terms of preparation, something we're finding really useful as we head into appraisal processes."

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ENTERPRISE TOOLS FOR SMALLER HAs FROM SASSHA

SASSHA has reported that although smaller housing providers may not have the IT budgets or the training to get to grips with some of the more complicated housing software, they still need the same operational capabilities as the larger housing providers, but simply on a smaller scale.

To address this, SASSHA has spent three years building a rapid application modelling tool. This can be used to create any 'anywhere' application; that is, software that runs on any device, anywhere. As well as integrating with

the company's own housing software, SASSHA ICE can also be a used in a stand-alone environment to link systems together and 'mobile enable' legacy systems.

SASSHA's mobile applications (known as ICE Cubes) can be used by customer service staff, contractors, tenants, housing staff, support workers, maintenance staff and even board members using our BoardCube, running on any iOS, Android or Window device.

Laura Woodfin from SASSHA said, "Our unified user interface brings Facebook-

style operation to complex business software, thereby reducing the need for expensive bespoke training. Furthermore, our ability to meet changing demands for mobile working and to rapidly accommodate new business models is unique in this sector and saves on massive development costs.

"SASSHA ICE is our commitment to the small social housing sector that seems to have been forgotten by other niche software providers."

MOBILITY, SOCIAL HOUSING AND TECHNOLOGY

Richard Bennett, Board Director & VP of Innovation, Customer Experience Foundation

What is technology in housing?
In many ways, the point of technology is to simplify traditionally complex processes and make them easy for everyone, everywhere, at any time. Technology in housing is about the ease with which people not only find places to live but also the experience of their home.

The homes in which we live are now at the leading edge of technology and innovation. Not because of how they are built or the bits and pieces they contain. Instead, this is because the devices we use within them are extraordinary. Regularly the capabilities of our personal mobile devices exceed those of corporations.

Mobility in the "everything, everywhere, in the palm of my hand 'generation'" has built a demand for better experiences. Never before has it been so critical to allow anyone to interact in a way they choose, every time and this extends from the experiences in our homes to the experience of our service companies.

Worse still, as individuals, we are far ahead of our customer experience providers (such as councils, housing providers and emergency services). As human beings, we have a higher

expectation about the usual information and support we receive.

Technology in the role of social housing
Since the evolution of mobility and our ability to work and socially interact anywhere, our tolerance of customer experience is more than tested when we can't use it on our devices.

Moreover, poor experience is reported socially faster and more widely than most businesses realise. For example, if a local council or housing provider doesn't have an app to request maintenance or support, it feels as dated as the phone lines they usually purport. This is even more jarring when we can't use email and must resort to phoning that number and being held in a queue. More often than not, this leads to social-media outcry.

There are few things more emotive than housing. Here our worst experiences (people rarely share the best) are publicly reported on the competency of the service received, from maintenance to our broadband.

Could we match our own social expectations of the world around us, by looking to our homes for help? What if our own houses deliver for us by contextually and autonomously feeding

back into managed services, customer experience and support?

At the centre of our worlds are our homes. Our home is where we live, obviously. It is more familiar than the smartphone in our hands or the tablets in our bags. In fact, the key to the evolution of many technologies has been the adaptability and affordability of mobile devices. Our homes could be better interconnected with us but most importantly, with the providers of our home services.

Enabling homes through socialisation and technology
Actually, the evolution of smart-home innovations are as startling as they are rapid. The speed at which we human beings adopt new technologies has never been faster. The boundaries surrounding user adoption of technology-based-services and support have vanished.

In reality, the ability to access one's own home through the cloud, allowing us to interact with our home services, is no longer fringe science because our expectations have grown over the last decade. Interconnecting with your home is already possible.

MOBILITY, SOCIAL HOUSING AND TECHNOLOGY
Continued from previous page

In fact, it has already been achieved and blended into Future.House projects in London.

This user experience, born of smartphones, is gradually enveloping our houses. Smart fridges can replenish our food. Connected sound systems will follow us through our houses with our music and our internet-playlists. Home security allows us to view our homes remotely (while sunning on a beach or skiing down a mountain).And even smart televisions delivering media from the very devices that begat the word 'smart'.

The true benefit of technologically-enabling a home is not about 'cool'. It is about engaging in all aspects of it. This includes lighting (smart bulbs), heating (remote thermostats) and media, such as Bluetooth speakers built into the very bulbs that light our homes.

The true benefit of a Future.House is a federated user-experience (i.e. many systems, working seamlessly together without deprecation of features or functionality). It is simple management, audit and reporting system. It is about interacting with your home and allowing it to interact with you.

This single user experience gives access to a range of services at the touch of a button. Because most of our lives are now about context, home technology is beginning to reflect that. Something definable, such as which interior doors that are open or locked when I'm away as my neighbour comes to water my plants. We could control our lighting, ready for when we come home on a dark night.

All delivered to an app on our personal device of choice.

The broader home applications are limitless and connecting to social and public services is equally as efficient. Everything described here is possible today.

Mobility and the socialisation of housing
These ideas of control, reporting and context apply to technologically-enabled housing and those who are housed in it. How much better would it be to use these systems and create a self-managing housing portfolio? In reality, the tenant experience would be streamlined through effective contact centres delivering more than just transactional services. This would be further augmented through a smart house aware of its status and autonomously requesting services (with context) in cost-effective overlay technologies.

Even today, we can engineer for the house itself to report on damaged bulbs, broken water heaters, faulty fridges and even as far as surfaces, locks and windows that need repairing. Take a burglary; why shouldn't the house be able to engage with service, support and emergency services to have this addressed?

Furthermore, allowing a house to self-audit keeps it updated with services and maintenance. A true technology ecosystem unites these elements of a building and reports on it. This is accomplished in exactly the same way as the smart offices of today.

The technology in existence simply and cheaply knits together the primary elements of a home into a single set of continuous auditing, reporting and provisioning.

Potential for evolving the interaction in social housing
The key to success isn't just user adoption. When we consider the rate that people adopt mobile technology, then consumption and interaction are everything. Why is my home not part of "the everything"?

The Future.House is clearly achievable by building houses with a future technology infrastructure (cabling, wiring, services, solutions, cameras, etc). Importantly, it is equally as simple to use the existing technology and overlay that on top of our current homes using easily found, easily unified technologies.

The Future.House can help (especially in social housing) in elements of efficiency, control and security. It is about access-anywhere and one simple interface. The key is to blend a home experience with mobility and applications to improve end-to-end service and support.

When my house is smart, it works with my mobility solutions. It then improves the support, maintenance and provisioning from my providers. It is the logical next step in our technology ecosystems and devices.

Richard Bennett is a board director and vice-president of innovation at the Customer Experience Foundation.

INCOME MANAGEMENT 2.0 – 'SORRY, THERE'S NO MONEY!'

Paul O'Reilly, Senior Consultant, Aareon

Whatever the outcome of the 2015 general election (this was written at the end of April), it is likely that politicians of all persuasions will have little choice but to continue the squeeze on welfare spending. The knock on effect of this will be more tenants at risk of falling into rent arrears, and the risk of a consequent increase in bad debts for the social housing sector.

Traditionally, the response from IT suppliers in the housing sector has been to provide 'automated arrears' modules which operate on the principle of escalation, so that when the escalation is run for each period, it will provide the user with a list of cases where a suggested action should be taken. As we all know from bitter experience, many of the letters generated by this process will not even be opened, let alone trigger action on behalf of the tenant concerned.

The key impact of the welfare reform changes will be the payment of benefit direct to the tenant; they must then employ certain skills to ensure that their money is not all spent at once, and they must also perform an often difficult balancing act in prioritising their outgoings and debts. The creditors with the most aggressive collection methods will, unfortunately, often win.

A new approach

So the realisation has arrived within the sector that the 'old' way of managing arrears is no longer suitable. Sending out thousands of letters every week, despite being very expensive, is also ineffective. Instead, investing more time and resources in helping tenants to pay their rent in a timely and sustainable manner is the obvious way forward. Which makes it sound very easy, doesn't it?

Sadly, it is not always that simple. The starting point, as the retail sector has realised over the last 25 years, is to know your customers and their habits. Only then can your staff begin to understand what effect their behaviour is having on the overall arrears picture, which has traditionally been seen as one huge

number with a pound sign in front of it. Behind that figure are thousands of real world reasons why those people are in arrears. And unless you can see the patterns of behaviour that have contributed to that situation, how do your staff stand a chance of addressing them, let alone helping those tenants get out of arrears?

Gaining control and knowledge

Aareon, suppliers of the QL integrated housing management system, has over 115 customers in the UK operating within the social housing sector. Within our user community, we are seeing significant improvements in the income management process facilitated by the adoption of new technologies, some of which are detailed below:

Customer knowledge

Without customer knowledge, you cannot begin to understand the root causes of arrears. For example, Aareon QL offers the ability to capture and store detailed and user extendable profiling data on every tenant. This can be in the form of both individual fields, some specific to welfare reform, some calculated fields such as the number of broken agreements, and some more general, and also structured questionnaires that can be linked to the client and tenancy records within the system; these can then be used either for reporting purposes, both on screen and using reporting tools, and also to trigger workflows (for example; if the question is 'Do you have a bank account?' and the tenant answers 'no', this may trigger a workflow task to the financial inclusion team). This data can be gathered by a variety of means, including mobile working and email/SMS surveys. By analysing this kind of data, it is possible to spot potential 'at risk' cases, even though they may not currently be in arrears, and intervene and offer support before problems arise.

Predictive arrears reporting

We have already discussed the concept of analysing behaviour to help see

through the 'fog' that is the overall arrears figure. Added to this is the increasing importance of being able to predict future outcomes, so that early interventions can be made, ideally even when the tenant is not yet in arrears, in which case the effort becomes preventative.

By employing existing data, such as previous charge and payment histories, we can analyse the effect of this behaviour on future outcomes, helping staff to understand not only the problem now, but the likely problem cases in the future. This information can then be used in the drive to change long-term behaviour regarding when rent is paid. Detailed breakdowns of the current case load, such as those cases increasing their arrears, those who are static, those who are decreasing in line with expectations and those who are decreasing but not fast enough, help to direct effort at the cases where intervention is likely to produce results.

Mobile working

One of the key enablers in the streamlining of income management is making staff agile; able to target visits to tenants in need of support, and then giving them the tools to view, record and update information while in the tenant's home in real time, with the option of taking payments via chip and pin technology as well as adding arrears actions, notes, direct debit requests, budgeting plans and requesting documents and rent statements.

All of that information is then updated back to the core system automatically, meaning that the office-based role is transformed into a highly agile, focused field-based one with the potential for far greater efficiencies.

Omni-channel communications

Increasingly, tenant self-service portals, automated SMS, email and social media channels can now be used for arrears management. Examples of this include automatic SMS notifications of balances sent every period to subscribing

INCOME MANAGEMENT 2.0 -'SORRY, THERE'S NO MONEY!'
Continued from previous page

tenants, self-service rent statements via portals, email or SMS; and rent payment reminders sent to vulnerable groups to remind them to make a payment, potentially based on the date of their universal credit payment. All of these options include the ability to append messages such as "for help with your rent, reply 'help'"; an option which can generate a workflow task for the relevant officer to follow up.

Direct debits by default
The holy grail for surviving welfare reform is to get as many tenants as possible into the culture of paying by direct debit. Having an integrated direct debit module, or integration with a third party tool, will enable this; the ability to offer discounts to tenants paying by direct debit is also a powerful incentive.

Foster a 'knowledge' culture
Perhaps the most difficult goal to achieve is to successfully introduce and maintain a culture in your organisation which places key emphasis on the collection, maintenance and usage of good and up-to-date tenant data. We all know that ownership of data in the housing sector has traditionally not been a strong point, but to use a well-used cliché, knowledge is power when dealing with the new reality of welfare reform.

Every member of staff must be empowered to collect and update data, by any relevant means, and they must also be made aware of the importance of the value of the data assets to the organisation in general. In this area of your business, the difference between successfully implementing this 'knowledge culture' and not could be measured in the loss of a significant proportion of your organisation's cash flow, so there is no room for complacency.

Paul O'Reilly is a senior consultant for Aareon.

DERBYSHIRE AND STAFFORDSHIRE COUNCILS TO SAVE £3M WITH NORTHGATE PROCUREMENT PLANS

Two councils in Derbyshire and Staffordshire have joined forces in a strategic alliance in order to save £3 million on their combined purchasing arrangements, following a partnership with Northgate Public Services to update their procurement activities.

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council and High Peak Borough Council have already saved a total of £620,000 a year and, with NPS's help, expect to save £3 million over the next few years in procurement alone. The two councils are also looking at potential savings identified by NPS that could add further substantial savings and efficiencies.

The two councils have started a corporate-wide transformation programme, including a series of service reviews across most areas of the two councils. This follows a high-level review of service areas by Northgate and a period of significant restructuring.

This included a successful programme of improvement with High Peak's housing service which saw substantial improvements in repairs, lettings and rent collections, leading to a 100 per cent improvement in productivity.

Andrew Stokes, executive director and chief finance officer at the two councils, said, "Northgate is very confident that our residents will benefit from the significant service improvements we make and, in line with its commercial model, the company has committed to put its fees at risk if efficiencies are not achieved. It's a win-win situation for both of us."

Northgate helps Sandwell Council generate £1.8m
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has generated £1.8 million in additional revenues after Northgate Public Services helped it to identify occupied properties through Northgate's empty properties service.

The empty properties service review, which took 10 weeks, found around 230 properties (out of a total of 1,570) that were identified as occupied but had been categorised by the council as empty.

Using credit reference data, Northgate's team managed the entire review process, including handling all customer contacts, system updates and, where required, carrying out physical property inspections.

To ensure value for money, NPS carries out its empty property reviews on a risk/reward pricing structure. This means that there are no up-front fees and payments are only made against properties confirmed as occupied.

Ian Hubball, revenues and benefits manager, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, said, "The NPS empty properties service was quick and easy to complete, and we only paid on delivery of results. This has helped to bring in £1.8 million of extra revenues for us."

Joe Bradley, executive director, Northgate Public Services, said, "With an average of £8,700 to be gained from each property brought back into use, councils can gain substantial income by reviewing their empty properties. As well as increasing the amount of council tax revenue raised and improving the accuracy of council tax records, it also helps to reduce fraud."

Allpay boosts RCT Homes' digital payments

RCT Homes has seen a surge in its tenants paying by digital payment channels which now represent more than half the value of payments it otherwise takes by debit and credit cards. The housing provider is using Allpay to offer tenants multiple payment options across cash, card and direct debits.

In the past year, RCT Homes has received more than £700,000 in rental income through online and mobile collection channels, allowing tenants to pay their rent via their mobile or through the internet. This represents nearly 60 per cent of the value of payments it takes via debit and credit cards.

The housing provider now has its own online branded payment pages, giving tenants access to a secure payment gateway, hosted by Allpay.

Paul Jones, head of income recovery, RCT Homes, said, "By using Allpay, we can offer the widest range of payment options to our tenants, allowing them to pay with a direct debit on a day that suits them, through the phone, on their mobile or over the internet.

"Promoting these payment channels and ensuring they are easy to access and use by our tenants is a big part of our digital and financial inclusion strategy. Residents also have the ability to pay at any PayPoint or Post Office if they feel more comfortable budgeting in cash."

Alongside its adoption of the Allpay service, RCT Homes is currently running a big push to promote digital inclusion for valley communities through its 'Do It' project. As part of the programme, people aged 50+ who live in Rhondda Cynon Taff can now access a free service offering one-to-one IT training.

VICTORY FOR CASTLE

Victory Housing Trust has chosen Castle Computer Services to carry out a major upgrade of its finance and reporting systems.

Castle will implement Infor SunSystems, along with Infor's budgeting and forecasting, expense@work and purchase2pay software, Asset 4000 from Real Asset Management, and QlikView's Business Intelligence.

Nathan Thompson, finance manager, Victory Housing Trust, said, "We've had our existing finance management system for almost ten years and our current version will soon cease to be supported, so we decided to spend some time considering our current and future needs.

"The key objectives were to upgrade our finance systems and reporting capabilities to improve interaction with other departments and provide more meaningful information to managers across the business. Castle's solution will deliver a major improvement to our budgeting and forecasting abilities and QlikView will revolutionise the way we provide information to managers.

"We chose Castle from a shortlist of tenders because they could demonstrate extensive experience, and this was backed up by references from their customers and by their ratings in Housing Technology's 'Review of IT Suppliers' report. We were also reassured that they had previous experience of integrating with Civica's Universal Housing."

Castle reported that it has also recently won tenders to support and maintain Infor SunSystems for AmicusHorizon and Network Housing Group, along with a tender to implement and support QlikView business intelligence with Sovereign Housing Association.

INCOME COLLECTION IS EVERYONE'S PROBLEM

John Doyle, Managing Director, The Housing Contact Company

Income collection needs to start as a technology challenge, with the automated elements being made to work harder so that the people element can work smarter, explains John Doyle, managing director of The Housing Contact Company.

As the roller coaster of the financial year for housing providers continues its relentless cycle, most income teams find themselves on that pleasant descent down the other side of the hardest climb on the ride, namely the financial year-end. Now is a time to almost enjoy the scenery and plan any objectives for the coming year. It can feel like a childhood summer holiday, where the end seems so far away that it is not worth worrying about yet. Nobody wants to revisit the stress-filled days of the year-end just past, or for that matter think about the probability that the cycle will repeat all over again next February/March. However, the big question is will next year be the same, better or worse?

Year-end panics

It goes without saying (I hope) that everyone would like it to be better next year, but I bet if we polled the income managers at a broad range of housing providers, the majority would expect the rush, panic and obsession to hit the year-end number for 2015/16 to be worse. With this being the first year to feel anything like the full impact of the universal credit roll out, that is not too surprising, but it is probably safe to predict that the next year-end will be far worse than anyone is expecting unless a much smarter way of working is found.

I would describe the approach taken last year, and probably in most previous years, by the majority of housing providers as an example of working harder for their income as opposed to not necessarily working that much smarter. Typical approaches have involved increases in personnel or at least overtime for existing people, with everyone focused on a target percentage that has to be achieved, almost regardless of cost. That in itself is

a risky approach, but next year it could prove futile, if not fatal, for some housing providers.

For the first time in recent memory, housing providers will have to compete for the bulk of their rental income. This will not be a challenge just for the income team, but one that needs to be faced by the entire organisation.

Income collection is your problem

I will repeat that point for added effect; if you work for a social housing provider and operate under the illusion that income collection is not your concern, then give that a second thought when you receive your next salary payment. Everyone's livelihood depends on your tenants paying for the services you deliver, so everyone needs to think how they can help.

For any organisation to compete effectively, it has to work smarter: This starts in the IT department with the need for accurate and timely arrears data. There is no point complaining about whatever flavour of housing management system you are using for this; they are all as bad as each other according to the recent academic study that was carried out by Sheffield Hallam University and referenced in the last issue of this magazine.

In the world of universal credit where a tenant may receive their direct payment on any day of the week, income teams will need to know as soon as possible if a rent payment has been made or not. For example, if the direct payment is made on a Monday, but a missed rent payment is not chased until the Friday of that week, then growing arrears are inevitable. Let's be honest; identifying actual arrears by the Friday would be a minor miracle for most systems right now, so the scale of the challenge is enormous.

Competing for rent

It's even worse when you consider that your new competitors, such as

BrightHouse or Wonga or even the regular utility companies, will have their data sorted and be acting on it quickly, so why not housing providers? As 'That Housing Guy' Tony Smith commented at the Housing Technology 2015 conference in March, "social housing is struggling to get to grips with little data, never mind big data!" He was right, so there has to be a major improvement in the face of direct payments.

The second component of a smarter process is the need to segment the different categories of arrears and then automate the delivery of the appropriate collections messaging; a 'one size fits all' mentality is simply not smart enough.

What I mean by segmentation is the arrears status of each individual tenant in your escalation process. Obviously, this is a dynamic situation that again needs to be facilitated via IT in terms of the provision of regularly-updated arrears status data, but that is essential if you are going to able to target the right people with the right message at the right time. Someone who has only ever missed one payment probably just needs a gentle reminder, as opposed to someone with an escalating or recurring arrears problem. These distinctions are generally being made by individual income managers at the moment, in what is usually a time-consuming and inconsistent manner. All of this needs to be standardised and then automated.

The final element of this smarter approach to income collection is establishing a consistent strategy to distinguish between where further customer support is needed and where greater enforcement is required. The notion that each individual case has to be judged on its merits by a committee of income officers is simply no longer sustainable. There will obviously need to be the usual safety valves, balances and measures applicable to any automated process, but the Pareto Principle will always apply, where the majority of the issues will be automatically resolved by

the process, leaving only the exceptions to be dealt with by the income team.

Scaling for growth
None of this is rocket science, and I know there are a few housing providers already working on this kind of process. However, most housing providers employ sizeable teams to do all these elements manually. It is hard work no doubt, but as the scale of the task increases, they cannot simply be multiplied. They will also be needed to focus on the more complex challenges that the full roll out of universal credit will undoubtedly present over the next couple of years.

There will be many tasks where people skills are essential, but the key challenge right now is to identify those that are less complex and can be automated effectively. The income collection challenge really is about getting the machine to work harder so the people can work smarter. The technology is out there, it just needs to be embraced.

John Doyle is managing director of The Housing Contact Company.

Adactus streamlines purchasing with Invu

Invu has implemented a new purchase order processing (POP) system at Adactus Housing Group, adding to its earlier implementations of an electronic document management system and an automated accounts payable system, both from Invu. The new system is intended to give the housing provider better control of its spending across all departments combined with a transparent system of accountability for budget holders.

The earlier adoption of the Invu systems had automated and accelerated many of its invoice processes and improved its invoice approval practices, but it didn't give budget holders full control of their budgets at the point a spending commitment was made.

The system developed with Invu moves the point of control from the invoice arrival to the earlier point of requesting a purchase and enables the budget holder to see the potential impact of that commitment on their budget before any expenditure is committed to.

Adactus staff can now search previously-purchased products or services to use as a template, or simply create a new one, add it to their basket and send a request for approval based on automated business rules within the system. The system uses these rules to relate general ledger codes to the relevant budget holders, who can in turn approve requests, while the system also has the capability for budget holders to delegate a level of authority on each GL code to users based on monetary value.

The system is self-service so once the line items are approved, an employee can raise and place an order with the supplier and 'receipt' the goods or service when delivered. When supplier invoices are received, they are data-captured using ABBYY capture software and either automatically matched to fully-receipted purchase orders or adjusted and approved by budget holders.

Chris Holden, management accountant, Adactus Housing Group, said, "We had no central purchase ordering solution in place. Having looked at other purchase ordering systems on the market, we decided to develop a bespoke solution with Invu. We wanted a POP solution that embodied the same principles as Amazon by being easy to use and intuitive.

"Invu's POP solution lets our budget holders easily approve purchase requisitions or reject any that they don't want to commit to before the supplier receives the PO, thereby preventing cash from leaving the business unnecessarily. Now we have an inclusive PO system in place, visibility across the purchasing process has been significantly improved."

Adactus's corporate services and finance departments were the first to pilot the solution and iron out any glitches, when ordering items such as stationery or IT equipment. The last two departments, (development and asset management) will be trained on the new POP solution over the next few months.

Holden adds, "Our budget holders now have far greater control over what is being spent against their budgets because they can see purchase requests before any goods are ordered. This gives Adactus better oversight and we can forecast our cash commitments better.

"Most people have used Amazon or eBay without having to use a help manual, which is the spirit in which our system has been designed. While our system includes a 'tips' mechanism, it is an intuitive system requiring minimal training."

1ST TOUCH 360 STREAMLINES HOUSING OPERATIONS

1st Touch has added '1st Touch 360' to its range of enterprise mobile workforce software. The dashboard-based solution is intended to streamline housing processes by delivering a single, 360-degree view of all key metrics and tenant data access points.

Using 1st Touch 360, all the information needed to conduct any tenant visit is collated in a single easily-navigable location. With such cross-functional visibility, tasks which would previously have required numerous tenant visits by different teams can now be resolved during one visit from a staff member operating in a multi-functional role. Housing officers with 1st Touch 360 on their device can now, for example, record and request reactive repairs, update customer profiling information or liaise with the housing provider's 'supporting people' team. At the same time, responsive repairs workers will be able to request a gas check, take a rent payment or report related issues such as anti-social behaviour and vandalism.

1st Touch 360 also provides comprehensive management information. The company cited the example of 'workflow for managers'; if a member of staff is ill, they can update through 1st Touch 360 and their tasks for the day will be automatically rescheduled to the next available colleague.

Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch

All details recorded or actioned using 1st Touch 360 are automatically updated in the housing provider's housing management system, irrespective of the system used. The company said that 1st Touch 360 can be implemented irrespective of the housing provider's existing mobile supplier, thereby minimising the risk of proprietary mobile lock-ins.

Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch, said, "We know how important driving value for money is as a central part of our customers' strategies. Of course, this involves cost reductions and increases in productivity and efficiency, but there is also the imperative to enhance the tenant experience and to raise service levels.

"1st Touch 360 helps to achieve all of these aims by streamlining customer-facing processes so that staff can become multi-functional. By reducing the number of visits required per tenant, it frees up hard-pressed resources for use in other more urgent areas."

1st Touch puts Weslo Housing on the move

Weslo Housing is now using mobile working software from 1st Touch to manage its reactive repairs, pre- and post-inspections and void management. The decision to use 1st Touch was in part due to Weslo's existing Aareon QL housing management system, with which the 1st Touch software integrates very easily. 1st Touch's mobile technology is also platform-neutral, so it will work with Weslo's existing Motorola ES400 handsets, iPads and any alternative handheld devices used in the future.

The 1st Touch software will be used to support the work of Weslo's 22 DLO reactive repairs operatives along with the four inspectors who carry out pre- and post-inspections and report on the condition of voids.

Jobs now come in from Aareon QL direct to the operative's PDA, allowing work to be scheduled and controlled better. Before completion of each job, the system also allows for the addition of any stock used, helping with Weslo's overall stock management.

Kevin Cairns, ICT manager, Weslo Housing, said, "1st Touch supplied a 'forms leader' to visit our team and recreate their processes on electronic forms. They then organised administrator training and have subsequently carried out, along with our own staff, any fine-tuning and configuration that was needed. In operational terms we now have a very effective and robust system that ticks all the boxes and works extremely well with our Aareon housing management system."

MCTEAR SET TO SAVE £75,000 WITH HOTCAKE MOBILE APP

Social housing contractor McTear expects to save around £75,000 over the next two years by using a new mobile app developed by Hotcake Digital Media.

Following the completion of a successful pilot scheme earlier this year, Hotcake has tailored its app to give McTear Contracts an easy and quick way to log work and provide the company with a paperless audit trail.

The public-sector contractor's 100-strong workforce has been using the app since April to book jobs, complete daily worksheets and inspection sheets, update check lists and obtain electronic signatures for all jobs completed.

Jamie Mowat, operations director, McTear Contracts, said, "The results of the pilot project surpassed our expectations and we are confident that the app will help us to save time and money as well as increase efficiencies and free up vital resources."

Call 2 Collect

The toughest arrears collection yet?

The introduction of Universal Credit and the 'Bedroom Tax' has made collecting rent from tenants even more challenging, with talk of an increase in arrears of as much as 50% in the next few years.

Are you ready to upscale? Has putting more staff on the frontline really been the most efficient, cost-effective way to solve the problem?

As a proven, scalable solution to meet this growing issue, Call2**Collect** automates much of the process and enables you to contact more tenants who have missed payments without increasing manpower.

The benefits are obvious:

• Enjoy better results with fewer advisers
• Collect more income in less time
• Reduce cost-per-contact
• Accelerate resolution

To try an instant demo for yourself, call us on 0161 259 1122 or visit HousingContact.co.uk

Housing Contact
In touch with tenants

Cloud Dialogs gets Network Housing mobile in just six weeks

Since January 2015, neighbourhood officers at Network Housing Group started using tablets to record tenant information, safety and building checks, and estate inspections. This follows the housing provider's decision to implement an integrated mobile solution from Cloud Dialogs to replace its inefficient paper-based processes and forms.

The entire implementation process and mobilisation of Network Housing's neighbourhood services team took just six weeks.

Paula Leon, mobile project lead, Network Housing Group, said, "By including our staff from the beginning of this project, we secured their buy in early. This then enabled us to turn this around very quickly. Staff enthusiasm is now driving the project further across the whole group."

All updates made in the field will now be updated in real time to the housing provider's CRM system. Any updates made within the CRM itself will, in turn, also be fed down to the tablet and alert officers of any new cases or activities created and assigned to them, allowing them to be more responsive to potential problems.

Paul Huckstep, executive director, Riversmead Housing Association (part of Network Housing Group), said, "This is an exciting transformation project for us, and will improve the way we deliver services to our customers, while achieving a number of other benefits very quickly."

CUTTING-EDGE INFRASTRUCTURE AT FCHO

First Choice Homes Oldham's head of ICT, Stephen Repton, reports on how the housing provider embarked on a procurement exercise beginning in 2013 to replace its entire ICT infrastructure (including telephony) and re-procure infrastructure support provision to support key business transformation activities.

Board approval and significant investment resulted in an eight-month project from June 2014 to January 2015; the scope of the project covered the implementation of cutting-edge technologies, a new managed infrastructure support contract being put in place and a newly-restructured in-house team delivering ICT support services and development projects. Running in parallel to this project, we also built and moved to brand new state-of-the-art headquarters and rationalised our office space.

The new infrastructure comprises a cloud data centre with Cisco FlexPod, NetApp and VMWare, on which core systems and Mitel telephony are hosted and wireless technologies for WAN provision. The wired and wi-fi LAN infrastructure is designed around a resilient Cisco Meraki core stack. Business continuity was also improved through the implementation of DRaaS and BaaS services. All computing devices were replaced with iGel thin client; these, coupled with 'follow-me'

printing and Mitel hot-desk telephony, have enabled us to realise the benefits of a truly agile workforce.

The project was a huge success and has resulted in an overall improvement in the way ICT services are delivered; it has resulted in a greatly improved user experience and more front-line services being delivered direct to customers through the use of technology. Repairs operatives can now complete works orders on mobile devices and neighbourhood teams can deal with customer enquires directly while out in the field. Efficiencies have been realised though greener, smarter technologies that use less power and cloud-based printing has greatly reduced our print costs.

As Sheena McDonnel, our business transformation director, said, "This is the transformation that the business needed in order to lay the foundations for improvements to the services we provide to our customers. We have been able to bring our ICT infrastructure up to date and provide the tools our staff need to operate in a digital environment."

Stephen Repton (Twitter: @stephen_repton) is head of ICT at First Choice Homes Oldham.

NORTH LANARKSHIRE MOBILISES £280,000 OF SAVINGS WITH NORTHGATE

Northgate Public Services has help North Lanarkshire Council introduce mobile working using smartphones and a cloud-based infrastructure to improve its tenant services. The housing provider reported that it has already saved £280,000 per year by using the Northgate service.

North Lanarkshire Council and Northgate jointly developed a web-based service for both staff and tenants, leading to faster services and shorter waiting times for tenants needing repairs to their properties.

Des Murray, property services manager for housing and social care, North Lanarkshire Council, said, "By giving officers smart devices, we have cut the time they spend travelling to and from the office to check diaries and paperwork. Instead, they have access to automated diaries, reducing cancelled or forgotten appointments from over 40 per cent to below four per cent. "Another advantage of communicating via a smartphone app is the low cost, at just a tenth of the cost of traditional

communications, and the immediacy of it, helping to reduce missed appointments."

A profiling exercise of users of the council's housing services found that people aged 60+ rated the previous service as excellent, but those aged 16-24 rated their satisfaction with the services at less than 50 per cent because they didn't like the bureaucracy and wanted to be able to interact through smartphones and social media.

Murray said, "Through the mobile app, a tenant diagnosing and reporting a housing repair can place a request in the hands of a contractor within just 15 seconds. They can also track the status of their request.

"Therefore, as well as replacing paper-based schedules with electronic schedules, this has removed the need for repairs inspectors to visit the office and enabled them to initiate works directly from their smartphone."

CBL GOES MOBILE WITH ABRITAS

Abritas has developed a mobile- and tablet-friendly version of its choice-based lettings online service that users can access easily via their mobile devices.

The mobile version of Abritas's CBL website provides users with an accessible and convenient on-the-go service. It allows users to log in, search for properties, submit bids for eligible properties, and view property adverts and recent lets, all from the palm of their hand.

In keeping with current practice and to ensure the site is user-friendly, users can still search for properties by location/postcode and distance and optionally by advert types and/or sheltered accommodation.

The user's eligibility is taken from the main website when they sign in, so they don't need to stipulate the number of bedrooms when searching for properties through the mobile site; only properties for which the applicant is eligible will be returned in the results.

Users can view a list of current applications, place a bid for a property, view a list of any bids placed, send messages to their landlord and withdraw bids, all via a mobile device.
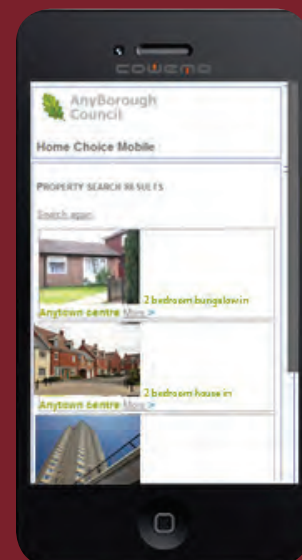
ARENA PARTNERSHIP LAUNCHES MOBILE SOLUTION

Arena Partnership has launched a new version of its Tracker software with many new mobile features that support its use in the field.

Designed for users working in resident involvement, community engagement and customer insight, the new software is already being used by over 50 housing providers in the UK and is available via the cloud on any internet-enabled device.

Alan Marshall, managing director, Arena Partnership, said, "Although the software is ready for mobile working, we still find the majority of our users currently access the software via a desktop in the office.

"We believe this is for several reasons. First, the availability of good internet connections is still currently a challenge in some areas, although this is likely to improve as 4G and more wi-fi hot-

spots are rolled out. Secondly, the cost of providing workers with devices to use can be an unwelcome initial expense for some housing providers but some are overcoming this by allowing workers to use their own devices (BYOD). Thirdly, using software in this way is relatively new; once the benefits of using software in the field are demonstrated, we expect that there will be a significant increase in its use."

MHS EMBRACES AGILE WORKING WITH MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

Nick Hadley, Head of ICT, MHS Homes

An office move last year saw the start of a more agile way of working for MHS Homes' staff, with new mobile technology added to support the initiative. After we reduced our office space from three floors to two by introducing hot-desking, our ICT team enabled flexible working practices through the introduction of mobile devices and software upgrades. It also included the development of a new intranet, provided by Interact, which staff can access from any location.

The new technology allows staff who normally divide their time between the office and other locations to spend more time in the community. This increased their efficiency, streamlined services and allowed staff to deliver better customer service. The staff members benefited from access to key software outside the office environment for the first time.

Since the office move in June 2014, our ICT team has provided Nokia Lumia smartphones, with both wi-fi and 3G connectivity, to 20 grounds maintenance and caretaking staff, replacing the basic, calls-only phones they had before. We hope to replicate the success of these devices with our repairs operatives over the next year or so. The surveyors in our asset management team can now use Dell Venue 11 tablets to complete technical surveys on site, and access detailed information about properties on the go. The tablets were specifically chosen for their compatibility with our Keystone asset management database, and reduce the need for surveyors to return to the office between jobs.

Sheltered scheme support officers were given Lenovo laptops so that they can remotely access MHS Homes' servers using Citrix Access Gateway. Enabled with both wi-fi and 4G connectivity, these allow our 11 support officers to spend more time in the housing schemes and to access a range of software previously only accessible in the office.

20 board members have also benefited from new software, with BoardPad installed on all of their iPads. This paperless technology allows board papers to be uploaded directly onto the app, and as the data is hosted externally, it reduces the risk of contents being lost in case of a problem with our servers or if the iPad was stolen.

Our 2015-18 strategic plan highlights the need to make best use of technology to achieve our objective of delivering great services. Over the next three years, we are investing in more digital services to help prepare tenants for universal credit, to bring our services into the community, and to ensure that resources are invested into areas which add most value to tenants. As part of this, we will develop our digital portal to allow tenants to access all of our main services and self-serve 24/7, including the introduction of online repairs appointment booking.

When it comes to office processes, the next 12-18 months will see investments into EDM systems and P2P processes to streamline services, reduce paper use and make financial efficiencies. Over the next year, we expect to expand the use of tablets to our wider asset management team as well as housing and income officers.

We aim to implement a device which meets the needs of all three roles and provides both great technology and continuity of service, allowing the tablets to be interchangeable between teams where necessary. This also reduces the amount of paper in circulation which further streamlines processes and reduces the costs of high paper and printing use. This will benefit around 40 staff in addition to those already embracing mobile technology. By the end of the 2015-18 strategic plan, the majority of staff members will have benefited from mobile technology.

Nick Hadley is head of ICT at MHS Homes.

Places for People's stock data on the move with PIMSS Data Systems

PIMSS Data Systems has completed the deployment of iPad Minis running its pimss4tablets software for Places for People's asset management team to compile stock data while out and about.

The adoption of a mobile solution is an attempt by Places for People to reduce the administrative burden and paperwork associated with its stock condition surveys. The housing provider reported that it had completed more than 16,000 surveys covering 60,000 assets across the UK over the past six years.

Dean Moran, responsible for asset management at Places for People, said, "We have been exploring mobile technology for some time but we had found that solutions were either unreliable or expensive. When pimss4tablets came along we were keen to explore the product and within six months we had evaluated a range of mobile devices, installed the product, completed testing and were up and running across the UK.

"We chose iPad Minis because they are the perfect design for carrying out surveying work; they are just the right size and easy to use. We already achieved a healthy return on investment, with the iPads running pimss4communities reducing travel time and freeing up our back-office staff to focus on planning and strategy work rather than data entry. The solution also complements other mobile working benefits with access to emails and other core business systems."

THIRTEEN GROUP SELECTS ORCHARD FOR IPACS

thirteen

Orchard has won a large project from the Thirteen Group, the north-east of England's largest housing group, to deliver an integrated property and customer system (iPaCs) to support the group's drive towards improving efficiency and managing costs.

The Thirteen Group was formed following a merger of Fabrick Housing Group and the Vela Group in April 2014 to form a

32,000-property group comprising Erimus Housing, Housing Hartlepool, Tees Valley Housing and Tristar Homes, alongside its specialist arm Thirteen Care and Support.

Orchard's solution will provide a fully-integrated system across Thirteen, yet enabling its partner companies to retain their autonomy while gaining the benefits of a shared and collaborative platform.

One of the key drivers in the project is consolidating many disparate and legacy systems (pre-dating the merger) from across the group into one fully-integrated system. This project also incorporates the implementation of Orchard's own asset

management and workforce scheduling systems, both of which came from Orchard's acquisition of In4Systems in 2013.

Ann-Marie Lenagh, head of ICT, Thirteen Group, said, "There are major benefits that the Thirteen Group will gain from the delivery of the iPaCs project. The adoption of an integrated system plays a major part in the overall IT harmonisation plans for the group and will enable us to simplify and accelerate deployment of our services."

Thirteen's iPaCs project is scheduled to go live later this year.

Better services at Radian with Advanced ConsultCRM

Radian Group has implemented a new CRM system from Advanced ConsultCRM to support its strategy for growth. The contract follows Advanced's recent acquisition of Goldcrest Solutions and its Microsoft Dynamics-based CRM products for housing.

The Goldcrest solution now gives Radian a single and accurate view of its 42,000 tenants and enables it to resolve more than 80 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact.

The solution is integrated with Radian's existing housing management system and was implemented in January 2015. The

solution has now been made available to 400 customer service and other tenant-facing staff, including surveyors, housing officers and tenancy support staff working from Radian's four main offices.

The system has streamlined case management processes to enable more efficient management of all enquiries, from tenants and non-tenants and across all contact types such as telephone, post and social media. The CRM solution is also being reviewed to replace existing systems within Radian's sales and lettings department to record and monitor leads.

Shelia Starr, head of customer services, Radian Group, said, "We had outgrown our previous system, which was only being used by the customer service team. We therefore struggled to capture more specific information about our tenants which became increasingly restrictive.

"In contrast, Goldcrest's housing solution is extremely flexible, intuitive and easy to use. We chose Advanced ConsultCRM as our preferred partner because of their knowledge of Microsoft's products and their ability to tailor the system to our needs."

ALTWOOD PROTECTS LONE WORKERS WITH STAYSAFE APP

Housing services provider Altwood Group is using an app, running on iPads, from StaySafe Business to protect its staff and monitor their safety using GPS and alerts.

The StaySafe Business app and surrounding cloud-based monitoring service tracks a lone worker's location via GPS and alerts their manager if they don't check-in within a specified time. The app runs on iOS, Android and BlackBerry platforms and

offers a range of functions including a panic button, working session expiry and low battery warnings, GPS tracking, inactivity and duress alerts. If an employee activates the app's panic button or fails to check in, alerts are automatically triggered on screen and via text and email, allowing Altwood to take immediate action.

Sundeep Dhesi, chief executive, Altwood Group, said, "Our staff all use iPads so having a safety

device that runs on a device that they already have to hand means that they rarely forget to use it. Employees visit several locations a day so to know when they are checking in and out and be able to track their location enables us to know that they are safe at all times, even when travelling between locations. We've tried other devices in the past but none has had the range of features, accuracy and ease of use that StaySafe has."

Don Cameron, CEO, StaySafe Business, said, "Lone workers can be seen as an easy target; research has shown that 84 per cent of housing association workers have been verbally assaulted and eight per cent have had a weapon used against them. StaySafe Business helps to ensure that any employees who find themselves in danger can discreetly signal for help and be found quickly, before a situation has the chance to escalate."

# FAMILY MOSAIC SIGNS UP FOR DIGITAL LOG BOOKS FOR NEW TENANTS

Family Mosaic is giving its new tenants access to Etive's Digital Log Book service to encourage their social and financial progression during their five-year, fixed-term tenancies.

During their first probationary year, Family Mosaic's new tenants are asked to sign up to an action plan which sets out what they will do to progress into work, training or education during their fixed tenancy period.

They are given employment advice, training or referrals to other organisations to support their personal progress and if they are already employed, they have access to Family Mosaic's own employment service for information on career enhancement.

The Digital Log Book is a secure digital portal that enables tenants to self-document their goals, actions and progress made. It has additional features to help with writing a CV, budgeting, as well as self-diagnostic tools around health, wellbeing, and community involvement.

Jenny Mclean, regional housing manager, Family Mosaic, said, "We are working with Etive to pilot the Digital Log Book with our new tenants with fixed term tenancies over the coming year. It will provide them with a new digital platform to access our health and well-being services, while at the same time allowing them to independently document the progress they make in improving their financial and social circumstances."
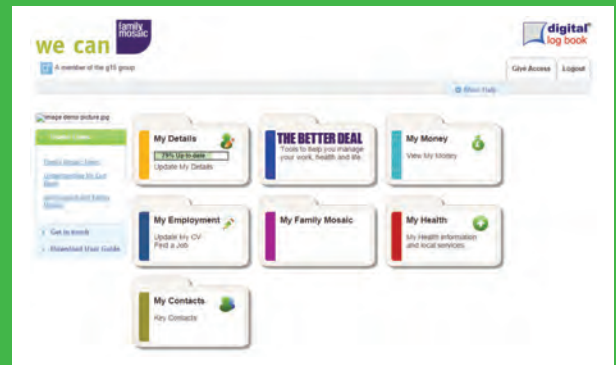
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DRS Xmbrace DRS

CRM OPTIONS IN HOUSING

Pete Davis, CRM Consultant, Esuasive

In order to deliver consistently excellent customer service, the social housing sector is increasingly turning to contact, case and customer management systems. The traditional housing management systems offer varying levels of customer management within or alongside their core functionality. We also have access to purpose-built CRM, systems such as Kana Lagan Enterprise and Microsoft Dynamics CRM.

There are three main options for improving the way housing providers deal with the complexities of customer management. The first is to use the contact management module included within your housing management system, which will have built-in links to the standard housing management processes. The second is to use a 'bolt on' CRM system, typically provided by your housing management system supplier and linked to the core system. The third is to implement a separate CRM system that has process and data integrations with all of your other core systems.

Successful customer relationship management hinges on having a system that encapsulates as closely as possible the real world the customer lives in. It needs record types for all the 'things' or entities that exist in and around your customer and you. It needs placeholders for all the bits of information that define those entities. And it needs to map the relationships that exist between them, however complex. All of this needs to be underpinned by three principles: a good data model, consistent design and excellent records management. So how do our three options for improving customer service stack up against these requirements?

Existing CRM modules

Contact management modules tend to be fairly simple in their approach. They hook into the existing housing management system's data model, a model born in the age where property management was at the centre of housing management. It's unlikely that all the required entities and relationships that you need today exist in a contact management module. And your supplier may struggle to meet the conflicting demands of its many customers. Nevertheless, contact management modules offer a simple solution to deliver efficiencies in customer service.

Bolt-on CRM

Typically, a bolt-on CRM system implemented by your housing management system supplier will be constrained by the data model of the housing management system itself. These models have stood the test of time but may not now reflect the world your customer lives in. But the CRM system itself will have a data model that is better able to support customer-focused processes.

On the downside are the restrictions that the supplier may place on you; this type of CRM implementation has to meet the needs of all of the supplier's customers, not just yours, and that can impose 'lowest common denominator' constraints on the system with all of the attendant frustrations that can bring. Alongside that, tight integration with the parent system may not provide you with enough flexibility or agility when introducing new business-specific processes.

Best of breed

Arguably, and perhaps counter-intuitively, a separate but integrated 'best of breed' CRM system may provide a better match to the requirements of today's housing providers. For starters, the underlying data model will be designed from the ground up to make customer management processes very slick indeed; the success or failure of marketing and customer service operations in the largest of commercial companies is dependent on an efficient, focused and agile CRM.

Out-of-the-box CRM systems have all the fundamental customer entities and relationships built in. But these will be generic, and need to be added to when operating the software in a specific sector such as housing. Unfortunately, this opens up the opportunity for poor design to creep in. CRM implementation projects are not easy to do and are often very time constrained. The solution provider may well cut corners on the design side and 'requirements creep' from the housing provider can have a significantly detrimental effect.

The importance of good design

These problems are avoidable. We are starting to see suppliers taking the issue of good design seriously, coming to the table with robust CRM solutions that a housing provider can take ownership of and build their business processes on. For example, we have the promise of a better world from Civica Housing CX, described as 'built from the ground up' and benefitting from a comprehensive and consistently-designed data model. And Esuasive has recently come to market with 'CRM for Housing', based on Microsoft Dynamics CRM, which puts the customer at the centre and out-of-the-box comes with a broadly-defined housing data model and pre-developed configurable processes ready for local customisation and integration.

You may have noticed that in the comparisons I haven't addressed the third of the underpinning principles; excellent record management. To meet this, organisations will need to promote good record keeping as a fundamental part of everyone's job. All three types of solutions will help with that promotion but any lack of flexibility or agility in your chosen system will likely result in some resistance to change.

Pete Davis is a CRM consultant at Esuasive.

L&Q SPENDS £168,000 ON DIGITAL INCLUSION

L&Q plans to help 750 of its tenants across 18 London boroughs to get online through the launch of a three-year, volunteer-led digital inclusion programme costing around £168,000. The programme will help L&Q tenants with little or no experience of computers to become proficient and get online with 3,000 one-to-one learning sessions.

L&Q's partner, Digital Unite, will recruit and train 150 community volunteers to become 'digital champions'; computer and internet experts who will help to share their knowledge with other L&Q tenants. The skills they learn will connect L&Q tenants with online banking, information from search engines, shopping online, government services, renewing benefit claims and job searches. The digital champions will be recruited from tenants, L&Q staff and local university students.

Mark Rowe, financial inclusion projects Officer, L&Q, said, "To get online, our tenants need regular, one-to-one support; having a team of well-trained and enthusiastic digital champions will enable us to provide that. Through our existing membership of the Digital Champions Network, we have already seen the huge importance of giving digital champions the right support."

Kathy Valdes, managing director, Digital Unite, said, "Digital champion programmes are conceived on the principle of capacity building. It builds tenants' capacity to use digital technology and it also builds capacity within organisations so they can deliver essential, sustainable and hyper-local support."

Grand Union self-serves with Astun Technology

Grand Union Housing Group has completed the joint development of a new tenant self-service portal with Astun Technology on behalf of its Aragon Housing and South Northants Homes subsidiaries.

Graeme Gould, information and telecommunications coordinator, Grand Union Housing Group, said, "With most government services already online or moving online, we felt that we needed to provide the convenience of a web-based application with the ability for tenants to self-serve. I came across Astun Technology's iShare platform, which is used extensively by local authorities, and asked them if they would consider adapting iShare for use in social housing."

Astun took on the challenge and in close collaboration with Grand Union developed the 'My Place Portal' powered by iShare.

Samantha O'Brien, web manager, Grand Union Housing Group, said, "We wanted the portal to not only allow tenants to view a history of their rent payments and repairs requests but also enrich the experience with much more individual functionalities. Astun had the ability to do all these requirements and more with its experience of iShare, so we have completely transformed the application."

Gould added, "The iShare platform is built on an open-source stack with which we were already familiar. I also knew that Astun was capable of integrating with many systems and was heavily involved with Open Data syndication. My Place Portal already takes advantage of many of these data sources and we will add more as they become available."

MOBILE WORKING 2.0

Housing Technology interviewed mobile working experts from 1st Touch, Incom Business Systems, Intercity Telecom and Waterstons on the new wave of mobile working practices, their predictions for the future and merits of the different technology platforms.

It is safe to say that the use of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, is now well established across most of the UK's social housing sector. In the past five years or so, the most obvious changes have been a combination of the ubiquity of mobile devices and the functionality of the software running on them, with a much greater blurring of the distinction between historically office-based applications and mobile applications (and apps, in many cases).

With many housing providers on their second or even third generation of mobile technology, what are the latest developments as we move towards mobile working 2.0?

1st Touch's CEO, Robert Dent, said, "The first main development is the higher number of what were traditionally office-based staff who are now spending more time in the field. The second is that the role of the traditional field worker has become less siloed; specialist skills are still needed, but an engineer will be expected to report if a tenant is vulnerable and a neighbourhood officer will be expected to arrange repairs."

> *"Mobile working will be linked to a wider range of devices and data metrics so that tasks will become more automated and booked to pre-empt issues before they arise."*
>
> Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch

As recently as around 2010, many field-based workers needed a panoply of separate devices, perhaps comprising a PDA, mobile phone, laptop and lone-worker device, whereas now in most instances they only need one. As James Hayward, Incom Business Systems' corporate sales manager, explained, "Cloud-based collaborative apps and network-neutral unified communications mean that workers only need a single device for the majority of work tasks. As a result, they can be more productive and housing providers gain more from expensive assets such as people, buildings, vehicles and IT infrastructure."

However, data access and security can sometimes be overlooked in the rush to enable mobile working. Waterstons' executive transformation consultant, James Alderson, said, "Recently, there have been significant advances in access to data and data security, with mobile application management providing secure data access and storage on any device; this allows many devices to be pushed out without ever having to worry about what is on them. Furthermore it offers a secure method of data access for those employees wanting to use their own smartphone or tablet (BYOD), providing a device-neutral approach to mobile working."

Mobile in five years' time
Peering into our contributors' crystal balls, in five years' time, not only will even more housing staff be using mobile devices for a greater part of their work, but data connectivity and coverage will be massively improved so that it will be possible to carry out more complex processes out in the field. Furthermore, 'wearable tech' and the Internet of Things will both contribute towards dramatic and often-unimaginable changes.

Waterston's Alderson said, "Looking ahead, we're going to see super-high speed, wide-area coverage for data connectivity; this will enable better access to mobile video, collaborative services and the cloud so that teams can work on large, complex documents wherever they are. And as more data and services move into the cloud, machine learning will push data to context-aware devices, giving you the information you need when you need it.

"Furthermore, using cloud-based services frees users from being reliant on any particular device, resulting in a combination of either having all information available on every device or, as computational power continues to increase, users will have 'one device that does it all' in their pocket but which also wirelessly connects to interface devices and screens in the office when needed."

> *"Cloud-based collaborative apps and network-neutral unified communications mean that workers will only need a single device for the majority of tasks."*
>
> James Hayward, Corporate Sales Manager, Incom Business Systems

Dent from 1st Touch said, "In future, an even wider range of users will be using mobile devices for their day jobs. Just as desktops have largely given way to laptops, laptops will give way to tablets and smartphones. Also, mobile working will be linked to a wider range of devices and data metrics so that tasks will become more automated and booked to pre-empt issues before they arise. For example, a gas engineer will receive a notification that a boiler in a nearby property is not running efficiently and that the tenant is currently in. This means that the engineer can then go and service the boiler, without any intervention from back-office staff."

New areas for mobile working
The growth of mobile working in housing began in the obvious area of housing providers' field-based staff and in particular their repairs and maintenance teams. As technology has improved and become more pervasive, it has spread inwards from the field and is being used for a much more diverse range of roles.

Nayer Sultana, Intercity Telecom's housing communications specialist, said, "Technologies that enable 'presence' will continue to evolve onto mobile and wearable tech and that could lead to field workers being able to engage with more information than is possible today. For example, rather than calling for urgent assistance and having to wait for an expert to arrive, a first-line support worker could video conference the expert via a mobile device to diagnose any issues remotely and guide the people on the ground to resolve issues rather than having to travel there themselves.

"And with the introduction of universal credit and the likely need to collect rent

payments via a wider range of channels, the ability to turn a mobile device into a mobile POS will become more widespread."

From the point of view of tenants and mobile services, Waterstons' Alderson said, "Housing providers should look at creating a channel shift with their tenants, moving away from the traditional inbound-only call centre model to a more interactive service where tenants can self-serve and engage with their housing provider on their terms via mobile apps or the internet. In addition, freeing housing officers from their desks and empowering them to make decisions is also key to enabling this; this shifts the emphasis from just delivering access to information remotely to providing context-aware information on multiple devices."

1st Touch's Dent added, "The next generation of mobile working will provide access to information and processes to people on the move as well as to traditional field workers. Users such as supervisors will be able to have access to real-time information pertaining to their teams and even department heads and directors will use mobile technology to view the KPIs and information relating to their areas."

"As more data and services move into the cloud, machine learning will push data to context-aware devices, giving you the information you need when you need it."

James Alderson, Executive Transformation Consultant, Waterstons

Choosing the right platform

Windows, iOS or Android; which is the right platform for mobile working? While iOS has its typical Apple devotees, Android tends to be seen as more open and has a larger number of apps available from Google Play Store and Android Market.

Hayward from Incom Business Systems said, "Currently, Android is a more open operating system than iOS and Windows from a developer's viewpoint. Android allows developers to maximise the flexibility designed into mobile devices.

"Technologies that enable 'presence' will continue to evolve onto mobile and wearable tech, leading to field workers being able to engage with more information than is possible today."

Nayer Sultana, Housing Communications Specialist, Intercity Telecom

This is both a good and bad thing, because while it provides flexibility, it also makes Android more vulnerable to mobile malware. A big change from Windows and Android vendors has been the introduction of mobile security platforms for managing enterprise mobility, such as Samsung Knox."

Intercity Telecom's Sultana added, "The key is to have additional solutions to secure the devices such as mobile device management (MDM) software. In my experience of working in the housing sector, I see housing providers using all of the operating systems and there is no one preferred system. However, there has been an increased demand for MDM software as more and more organisations realise the importance of securing their data."

And in terms of particular platform-specific applications, 1st Touch cited a few interesting examples relevant to the housing sector. Google's Project Tango is a new Android development that makes a mobile device accurately aware of the size and shape of its surroundings and where the device is within it. This could streamline stock condition survey and voids or allow lone workers to accurately report not just GPS locations but also which floor, flat and room they are in.

Dent said, "Apple Pay has become phenomenally popular in the US, and when it launches in the UK, it could revolutionise the way that rent is collected. And while Apple usually keeps its cards close to its chest when it comes to development, the launch of the Apple Watch could very well jump-start the wearable technology market.

"Microsoft's approach is the unification of Windows across all of the hardware platforms. For example, with Windows 10, a user will be able to start one process on

their laptop, check updates on the process on their smartphone, and continue with the process on a Windows tablet."

Leap-frogging to mobile 2.0

According to 1st Touch, mobile 1.0 was very much about moving tasks and processes away from paper and onto devices, whereas mobile 2.0 is about providing a wider, more holistic view to mobile workers, anticipating and prompting actions and providing a full mobile workspace. With that in mind, can housing providers 'leap-frog' over mobile 1.0 and go straight to the new world of mobile 2.0, or do they need the basic infrastructure first?

Incom Business Systems' Hayward said, "No, housing providers don't need a platform right now. In fact, not having a mobile platform means the housing provider isn't constrained by existing processes. Housing providers need to identify a strategy based on an understanding of the long-term needs within their service model. The key is to identify the primary drivers for the mobilisation of staff and processes and not to try to do too much at once."

Alderson from Waterstons added, "Mobile technologies are becoming much cheaper and therefore accessible to all, and as further services move into the cloud, which inherently supports mobility, the need for particular devices and specialist technologies is diminished.

"It is much more about having an integrated information at the backend which allows the right information to be served to the end user on any device. Integrating data from different cloud providers, or from on-premise legacy systems is a significant challenge and should be given special consideration by any organisation looking at mobile working."

More transparency in housing

Sir – An increase in the proportion of private sales in mixed tenure blocks is driving demand for greater transparency and accuracy in service charges and estate management in the social housing sector.

While social housing tenants might typically pay a flat monthly rental charge which would include their service charges, private-sector leaseholders paying separate charges expect much greater detail about specific costs and proof of value for money. As private developments make up a growing proportion of homes built by housing associations, operators in the sector are finding they need to improve transparency and communication.

In addition, there are growing complexities in managing varying service charges within mixed tenure schemes. With private landlords, local authorities and housing associations often sitting alongside leasehold owner-occupiers and commercial tenants within a single estate, housing associations are increasingly subject to private-sector legislation and industry-body guidance from organisations such as RICS and ARMA.

Confusingly, all the legislation doesn't apply to all leaseholders / tenants, with various aspects applying to just the private sector, some just the public sector and some to both. Similarly, residents are required to pay varying proportions of the service charges depending on their tenure, the type of property they live in and their specific contract. The need to apply VAT can also vary.

Consequently, housing associations are finding that their existing systems (which, for many, can be Excel spreadsheets) can't manage their service charge processes accurately and in sufficient detail while also staying on the right side of regulations.

With their heavy focus on customer service, accuracy has become of paramount importance to housing associations. Due to the growing complexity of service charge management, regulations and the increased need for transparency in the sector, the systems and spreadsheets they've relied on so far may not be able to cope with the complexity required.

As a result, we are seeing a significant increase in demand from housing associations for software which can manage these situations; sometimes as a standalone solution or possibly linked to existing solutions.

James Lavery
Head of Marketing, Qube Global Software

Problems with Right to Buy

Sir – As the election approaches, another day, another promise. The Conservative's manifesto commitment to give housing association tenants the Right to Buy (RTB) was launched with great fanfare and certainly hit the headlines. But it will also hit very substantial obstacles if the Tories win.

They were clearly wooing 'hard-working' people in an attempt to echo Margaret Thatcher's original RTB policy. This worked well 35 years ago but this time it's destined for a rough ride.

Why? Well there are very practical problems which take the gloss off the initial idea, namely:

- *The RTB promise on housing associations' properties has been tried before but has been rejected by the House of Lords over the last 20 years. To force housing associations to implement this new policy would require new laws.*

- *There will be strong resistance from housing associations and local authorities, particularly in London. And is it fair? A select few get a cheap home, while those in the private rented and house-buying sectors are struggling to get anywhere near the foot of the property ladder. It's not as if there aren't opportunities to access cheaper housing via shared ownership schemes.*

- *Supporters of RTB claim that no homes were lost back in the 1980s with the original RTB. That may be true regarding the nation's total housing stock, but untrue when it comes to examining the number of homes available to rent to people in need. It reduced (and continues to reduce) that number dramatically. We all know that very few of the homes were replaced and that the income from the sales went to HM Treasury and not into the housing pot. So, millions that could have been used to build new homes were lost.*

However, it may not all be bad news. In some cases, housing associations might benefit from being able to sell some of their stock. Properties in high demand areas that have high long-term maintenance costs (for example, old steel-framed properties) would be ideal candidates for RTB.

The real problem for the Tories remains the issue of how to increase the total housing stock without upsetting the 'nimbies'. This manifesto statement is, of course, all about attracting votes, rather than creating a serious policy. But if a law enabling RTB to happen was introduced, some might wonder whether the impact will be as dramatic as many believe.

Only time will tell and we haven't got long to wait!

Phil Shelton
Chief Executive, Shelton Development Services

Editor's note: this letter was written before the results of the General Election.

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QLIKVIEW & CASTLE BOOST ROCKINGHAM FOREST'S PERFORMANCE

Rockingham Forest Housing has completed the implementation of a business intelligence solution from Qlikview to run over its OmniLedger housing management system in order to deliver more timely and accurate performance reports. The implementation was carried out by Castle Computer Services.

The housing provider reported that, before the introduction of the Qlikview system, it was taking far too long to produce reports to measure almost 50 KPIs and the resulting reports were almost worthless because they were so out of date.

Isabel Jekyll, operations director, Rockingham Forest Housing, said, "We used to spend so much time populating and running reports that were basically just lists of data. We needed to be much more fleet-footed as

timeliness had become an issue and reports were taking so long that the situation had changed by the time they were available.

"The introduction of QlikView has made a real difference. Our reports are no longer about the data, but actually about what the data tells us. As a result, our performance is better than ever and we are much more flexible and responsive.

"Reports are now available when we want them and the greater visibility of information allows us to identify trends quickly and take the right action. They can now ask the right questions and be proactive, giving us time to turn a situation around before it becomes a problem. It has also been a great help in terms of speaking to contractors about any performance issues that may arise."

CLOUD-BASED CCTV SUPPLEMENT FROM CLOUDVIEW AND HOUSING TECHNOLOGY

For the first of Housing Technology's new series of 'In-Depth 2015' supplements, we have teamed up with Cloudview to look at how housing providers can use the latest cloud-based technologies to reduce the cost, effort and time of using their new or existing CCTV infrastructures to track anti-social behaviour and crime, as well as extend its use to monitor their physical assets, the state of communal areas or even when bins need emptying without needing to do a site visit, thereby cutting down on time and travel costs.

If you're reading the print version of Housing Technology then you will have already received the supplement but if you are reading the PDF or online version, you can download a free PDF version of the supplement from www.housing-technology.com/indepth.

As any reader who has been involved in any housing-related incidents using CCTV, most 'traditional' CCTV and surveillance systems used by housing providers (and indeed, most other organisations) are pre-internet relics. They are expensive to install and maintain. They are prone to theft and vandalism. The recorded footage is often low quality, corrupted or simply over-written. And actually accessing the footage is both expensive and takes too long.

In contrast, cloud-based CCTV records and stores all of the footage in the cloud and can be accessed through a browser on any internet-enabled device. Footage can be viewed in real time or historically, including the ability to set parameters to cut down the amount of footage needing to be reviewed. Naturally, security is vitally important; Cloudview is the only CCTV solution of any type that has been awarded the prestigious Police Preferred Specification status by Secured by Design.

For housing providers with an existing network of CCTV cameras, Cloudview provides a Visual Network Adapter. This is the vital link that connects any camera to Cloudview's cloud-based image management system and ensures authorised users have quick, easy access to footage whenever they want.

We hope you enjoy this first In-Depth supplement, and please get in touch at **indepth@housing-technology.com** if you would like to know more about cloud-based CCTV and surveillance.

Footprint Solutions signs Golden Gates for information management solution

Footprint Solutions has been awarded a framework agreement by Golden Gates Housing Trust to provide a total information management solution.

As part of the agreement, Footprint will provide Golden Gates with a range of services including long-term offsite data storage, lone-worker protection, Chip & Pin payments, tablet-based mobile working, web-based records management, and all hardware devices and their associated data packages.

Footprint is also offering the same package to other housing providers that join the framework agreement. Housing providers interested in joining the framework can bypass their standard procurement processes because GGHT has already completed the necessary legal procedures; this means other housing providers within the framework can buy solutions direct from Footprint at fixed prices.

Peter Fitzhenry, director of housing, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said, "Footprint Solutions has demonstrated its skills and expertise in providing a one-stop shop for mobile working and paperless solutions. The purpose of the framework is to improve our service delivery and encourage other housing providers to reassess their processes and discover how they could save time and money."

Since signing the framework agreement in March 2015, Footprint has signed up Equity Housing as the first member

of the framework alongside Torus, a housing group formed by Helena Partnerships and Golden Gates. In both instances, Footprint will supply a range of applications including neighbourhood services, lone-worker safety, vehicle tracking, professional services, property and repairs management, and redaction services.

Footprint's asset management software for void repairs

Golden Gates is also implementing Work Connect, Footprint's project and asset management application, to improve productivity and efficiency for its void repairs.

Work Connect is designed to keep projects and costs on track from start to finish. The software can be used to generate fast, accurate estimates and maximise remote worker productivity and efficiency.

Golden Gates will initially use Work Connect to plan jobs, provide tradespeople with information on current workloads and allow them to upload timesheet information and completed work. The software can also be used to order supplies and manage the costing and accounting of work carried out.

Peter Fitzhenry, director of housing, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said, "Void repairs demand a significant degree of preparation to make sure that tradespeople are carrying out tasks in a timely and cost-effective manner. After implementing Work Connect for void management, we intend to extend its use to all planned repairs due to be carried out once the properties are occupied from May 2015."

John Sant, CEO, Footprint Solutions, said: "Housing providers have a duty to protect their stock which means carrying out maintenance and repairs on occupied and untenanted properties. Work Connect allows Golden Gates to map the most efficient routes and work schedules for remote workers that will deliver the best results in terms of time and resources."

WHY AGILE IS THE ANSWER FOR CIRCLE HOUSING

Jen Smith, Head of Diversity & Inclusion, Circle

In an era of change, housing providers must evolve to keep pace with developments in the housing sector, in an environment of increased financial pressures created by a lack of reliable funding, continuing welfare policy changes and to help meet the ever-growing need for housing. We must also respond to the demands of our tenants who increasingly prefer to engage with us online, providing them with a personal, responsive service. Agile working is a new concept for the housing sector, and a necessary step to ensure we are well equipped to face the demands of the future.

Circle Housing is one of the first in the housing sector to implement agile working. Agile working makes use of technology to transform our workplaces into flexible spaces, where staff are not tied to a single desk, but can move around as they deem fit for the particular task in hand. Each staff member is provided with a laptop and smartphone, which not only allows them to move around our existing office spaces in a more flexible way, they also have a mobile office at their fingertips, wherever they are.

Why are we doing this?

Improving service for tenants
Being agile enables us to spend more time out with our tenants, providing services directly to the communities that we serve. Tenant-facing staff can address or resolve issues or answer queries wherever they are, such as in residents' homes using their mobile connected laptops and smartphones.

It also enables us to function more homogeneously rather than in silos, through improved cross-team relationships.

Reducing our overheads
Once we have finished implementing our agile programme, we will have moved from 54 per cent to 150 per cent desk usage. This enables us to make the best possible use of our available space and take steps towards reducing the size of our overall office portfolio, with staggering projected savings.

Empowering our staff
Staff productivity has improved. Not only does the technology enable staff to take advantage of previously lost time, such as while on public transport, but also liberates them by giving them more control and measuring their performance based upon their outputs has proven to encourage creativity and yield greater results.

'Presenteeism' is common across the housing sector which, although well-intentioned, has serious implications for staff, whose productivity is reduced, damaging team moral and may lead to eventual long-term sickness, putting extra pressure on teams. Our move to agile working is one way in which we are addressing this problem by empowering staff and enabling an improved work-life balance to make us more efficient.

Agile working is particularly good for staff with responsibilities outside work, such as parents and carers. It's also good for people with disabilities; for example, people who have MS or arthritis and experience times when pain is worse

often find it easier to work from home during that time. Other staff, whose mental health is particularly affected by the rush-hour commute, can adjust their working hours, within the needs of the business. Looking after the needs of our staff increases the likelihood that we will get the most out of each individual.

Successfully implementing the change
In order to implement this new way of working and help staff who may be resistant to change to adapt, we used an end-to-end, multi-faceted approach. We first ran an agile working pilot, which was invaluable to highlight the improvements needed, before we rolled it out across the organisation.

The lessons we learned included having the correct equipment and technology in place, a better understanding of cultural issues, and a clearer explanation of the likely impacts and benefits. These lessons were then incorporated into our wider agile working rollout, which is running from August last year until this July. During that time, we will have made approximately 2,000 people agile, which is 80 per cent of our workforce. So far, our approach has resulted in staff overwhelmingly embracing this new way of working.

Circle Housing is already enjoying the many benefits of agile working, from significant cost savings to maximising productive staff time and, above all, increasing responsiveness to our tenants' requirements.

Jen Smith is the head of diversity and inclusion for Circle Housing.

SOUTHERN HOUSING'S CIO NAMED IN CIO TOP 100

Kevin Connell, Southern Housing Group's IT director, has been named in the 2015 'CIO Top 100' announced by CIO UK magazine in April.

The CIO Top 100 list recognises the most transformative CIOs in the UK, demonstrating how they are

initiating and leading technology-enabled business transformation within their organisations.

Connell is leading Southern Housing's IT transformation, and reshaping his supplier base to allow the business to become more tenant-centric, commercially

focused and able to react to change more easily. He said, "At Southern Housing Group, we are introducing innovative IT solutions to help deliver an enhanced tenant experience, and we are passionate about using technology to realise efficiencies and improve access to our services."

COACTIVA HIRES DEDICATED HOUSING EXPERT

**Kevin Gilhooly, Housing Sector Manager, Coactiva**

Public-sector IT company Coactiva has created its first dedicated role for the social housing sector with the appointment of Kevin Gilhooly as its senior business development manager for the sector. Gilhooly's appointment is accompanied by six other new recruits, each addressing different public-sector areas.

Before joining Coactiva, Gilhooly spent a decade at Housing Partners where, among other things, he was responsible for launching HomeSwapper, the national mutual exchange service which is now used by over 300,000 tenants and the majority of housing providers and local authorities to help tenants find a new home.

Ray Fielding, CEO, Coactiva, said, "When Coactiva became part of Callcredit Information Group in 2014, it was with the intention to provide both businesses with the opportunity to combine our offerings and to increase our joint presence in the public sector. Over the last year, it became clear that bringing our expertise together was an excellent decision."

Thermal mapping at Redbridge with Bluesky
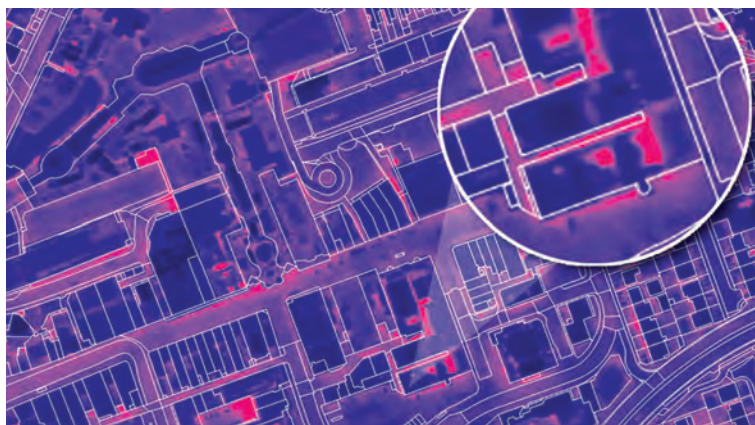
A night-time aerial survey of Redbridge is being used to map heat loss from the borough's buildings.

Thermal mapping data is helping the London borough to assess how different types of buildings are performing in terms of heat loss. The ongoing study is exploring possible connections between property, land use types and heat loss in order to identify which types of buildings most need energy efficiency improvements.

The data, provided by Bluesky, was captured using state-of-the-art aerial mapping sensors specifically designed to capture heat loss measurements from buildings at night.

MIDLAND TELECOM CHOSEN BY BCHG FOR UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS

Midland Telecom has completed the implementation of a unified communications system at Black Country Housing Group. The system is based on Unify OpenScape (Unify were previously known as Siemens Enterprise Communications) and accompanied by what BCHG described as "a generous licensing deal".

OpenScape enables BCHG to have a mixture of IP desk phones for office-based staff along with a custom app on smart phones that gives desk phone features on their mobile phones. The MyPortal app on their mobiles has replaced their former desk phone completely. BCHG also installed IP phones connected to the main system at each of its housing schemes to improve communications between all of its sites.

Steve Kesterton, ICT manager, Black Country Housing Group, said, "The implementation of the new system with unified communications has vastly improved the handling of both internal and external calls throughout BCHG, and the mobility app means that staff who work offsite can still handle their calls as if they are at their desks.

"Overall, OpenScape has allowed us to tailor call-handling within each team to meet their individual needs, improve customer service and improve communications throughout BCHG. I am pleased with how the implementation was carried out by Midland Telecom and impressed with the knowledge of the engineers whom we worked alongside during the project."

FIRST WESSEX CHOOSES PROJECTVAULT FOR COLLABORATIVE FILE SHARING

Document management and digital specialist Service Point has won a two and a half year contract with First Wessex Homes to provide it with access to ProjectVault, Service Point's proprietary online document management system.

ProjectVault will enable First Wessex to create a single point of contact for multiple partners working on a project, with the system collating all documents and information onto a platform that can then be accessed and shared across multiple users.

Richard Nightingale from First Wessex Homes said, "ProjectVault is a user friendly platform that gives us the confidence that the files that we are all accessing are the most up to date versions. Without this system, so many things could go wrong, and ProjectVault makes working collaboratively simpler."

First Wessex's £100m, seven-year neighbourhood renewal programme in Aldershot will be the first project to be run using ProjectVault.

ONGO TAKES ON APPRENTICES FOR TENANT SATISFACTION SURVEYS

Ongo, the housing partnership which includes North Lincolnshire Homes, has appointed a team of apprentices to conduct its tenant surveys, supported by Voluntas and a local college.

Five apprentices, aged 17-20, will carry out telephone surveys on behalf of North Lincolnshire Homes as part of a three-year apprenticeship. The apprentices will also carry out surveys and research work for Scunthorpe-based North Lindsey College. Voluntas is providing the survey and analysis software.

As well as conducting surveys, they will also carry out customer services work for Ongo and the college while they work towards a level-two apprenticeship in customer services. Two of the apprentices are sponsored by the college and three are sponsored by Ongo.

Karen Cowan, customer services and support manager, Ongo, said, "We already have really good links with North Lindsey College, which itself also has a successful track record in supporting apprenticeships, and we are always looking for ways we can provide further opportunities for young people in North Lincolnshire.

"During a conversation at the college, we learned that one of the greatest areas for recruitment in North Lincolnshire is in customer services. That then prompted a conversation with Voluntas and the college to see how we could work together to create a local enterprise that brought benefits to us all but, most importantly, also created opportunities for local young people."

Dylan Chipp, co-founder and director, Voluntas, said, "Employment opportunities for young people are the stepping stones to great things. I started work as a YTS trainee in the late 1980s and I owe the local council in Tewkesbury a great debt for giving me that chance. I hope this fantastic scheme helps North Lincolnshire's young people along their career paths towards achieving their own ambitions."

TRUSTMARQUE RECRUITS THREAPLETON FROM SOVEREIGN

As part of its focus on the social housing sector, Trustmarque has appointed James Threapleton as its client director for housing and the public sector. Threapleton joins the company after spending seven years at Sovereign Business Integration Group.

Threapleton said, "Trustmarque already works with several housing providers and numerous local authorities. With its track record in delivering managed services, professional services, software licensing and cloud platforms, Trustmarque has all the credentials needed to become a leading, trusted advisor to UK housing organisations, offering a full range of IT services from a single provider."

IDOX WINS 5-YEAR CONTRACT WITH ST HELENS COUNCIL

Idox has announced a five-year managed service agreement with St Helens MBC to deliver a broad range of its local government and citizen engagement solutions.

The Idox solutions will help the council to provide an enhanced online service to transform planning and building control community engagement through functionalities such as on-line application tracking, consultation and access to related documentation.

The solution is designed to deliver a responsive and flexible solution to meet the changing needs of the council and its service users, while reducing ongoing costs. In order to ensure that council staff are able to focus on service delivery, all of the solution hosting and related technical and application services are provided by Idox as part of the managed services agreement.

ORBIT LAUNCHES REAL-TIME TENANT FEEDBACK

Orbit Group has reported that it is launching the social housing sector's first real-time tenant feedback system. The real-time system is being implemented by Rant & Rave, a provider of SaaS-based customer engagement solutions.

The Rant & Rave system will ask tenants for feedback via text message, voice message or email. This feedback is uploaded onto the Rant & Rave dashboard which members of Orbit's staff can log into, enabling them to quickly see any negative comments they need to react to, and celebrate any great feedback for staff.

Louise Oakley, director of service excellence, Orbit Group, said, "As part of Orbit's '2020 Vision' of reaching 90 per cent customer satisfaction and having 75 per cent of customers accessing services online, this is an important step forward in making sure we are meeting customers' needs. We want to be able to give our customers the best service possible and this new technology helps us do that.

"Before we launched Rant & Rave, we had telephone surveys which gave us a snapshot of an individual's opinion but it was very limited. With the introduction of Rant & Rave, we can find out what our customers are thinking in real-time; we can easily pinpoint where we're going right and wrong, and most importantly give people a voice and the chance to air their views as soon as they've finished on the phone."

Dennis Fois, CEO, Rant & Rave, said, "Expectation of excellent customer service is at an all-time high. Housing providers are in a unique position where customer service can easily be overlooked. However, Orbit Group is leading the way in customer service, ensuring it is giving its customers a voice and, most importantly, acting on it."