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IN-DEPTH | 2015

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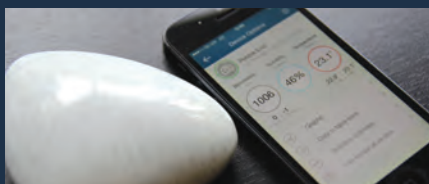
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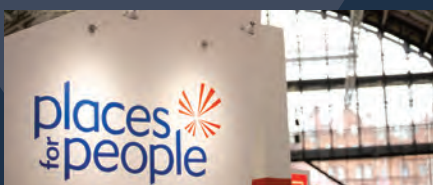
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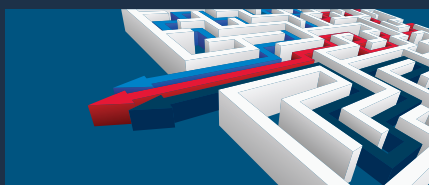
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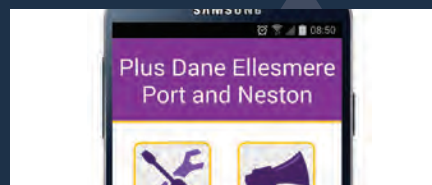
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Web 1.0, 2.0 and the Internet of Things

Since Housing Technology began reporting on IT developments in the social housing sector in 2008, it's been very apparent that housing providers are catching up with or even eclipsing their contemporaries in other parts of the public and private sectors. This is clearly a good thing.

However, Housing Technology thinks that the next demarcation will be between different housing providers' web services, and this will mark a significant turning-point for many housing providers. Some of the larger housing providers may find that they are forced to keep up with smaller, more nimble and IT-savvy housing providers, who at the same time may themselves also be on the look-out for smaller housing providers in order to boost their portfolios.

Why? Well, web 1.0 was essentially a passive process and was just about setting up a website and publishing details online of a housing provider's services, with perhaps a few forms to report repairs and other tenant concerns, but with little or no integration with the housing provider's core applications; a lot of housing providers are still at this stage.

Web 2.0 was about embracing social media, self-service apps and, in general, a more proactive approach to dealing with tenants via their preferred channels, with some integration direct to housing providers' core business applications. As many housing providers are discovering, this approach improves tenant communications, boosts productivity (through process automation; see page 18) and reduces transactional costs.

The next stage for housing providers will be integrating the Internet of Things (IoT) into their operations. Smart meters and sensors within their properties will provide an unprecedented volume of data that they can use to not only deal with day-to-day activities, such as broken boilers or remotely controlling electrical appliances, but

also for 'big data' analytics to model and forecast, for example, when particular assets are likely to fail or need replacing or to predict tenants' behaviour. This has the potential to transform housing providers' asset management strategies, their ways of doing mobile working, and their responsive and cyclical repair schedules, to name just a few obvious areas.

As reported on page 26, the Connected Home Consortium shows how IoT pilot projects can be set up relatively easily and at a reasonable cost to very quickly start delivering useful streams of data. Just as there was a meteoric rise in the adoption by housing providers of mobile working, web services and smartphones towards the beginning of this decade, Housing Technology expects similar growth from IoT over the next few years.

Risk and diversification

The recent Budget announcements by the government around cutting social housing rents by per one per cent per year is likely to not only limit housing providers' ability to build new homes but also affect the stability of their income streams and therefore their credit ratings with potential or existing lenders.

As many housing providers are already doing, one solution is to diversify their income streams, with many instances of housing providers successfully reselling some of their own services, such as repair and maintenance or call centres, to other housing providers, councils and local agencies.

Housing providers' IT departments should therefore be considering how their wider IT infrastructures could cope with, or indeed actively contribute to, the diversification and reselling of some core services, and take this into account when planning the deployment of new applications or upgrades to their IT infrastructure, perhaps moving to more cloud-based services to give them the ability to scale up and down in line with the demands of the business.

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EDITOR
Alastair Tweedie
alastair@housing-technology.com
Twitter [housingtech](https://twitter.com/housingtech)

PUBLISHER
George Grant
george.grant@housing-technology.com
Twitter [tibcomp](https://twitter.com/tibcomp)

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Jo Euston-Moore
design@housing-technology.com

EDITORIAL AND NEWS
news@housing-technology.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Subscribe at www.housing-technology.com
or email: subs@housing-technology.com

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Robin Hood Way
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HOUSING PARTNERS IN THE CLOUD WITH HOUSING HUB

Housing Partners has launched a new version of its Housing Hub, with greater emphasis on data analytics.

The new service comprises a number of cloud-based modules aimed at giving housing providers the tools they need to not only identify and support tenants in greatest need, but also to uncover and analyse correlations across their tenant and asset data sets.

At the core of the new Housing Hub are centralised GIS mapping, analytics and searching tools, along with Housing Partners' HomeSwapper service. Housing Hub also includes Insight (formerly known as Who's Home) which layers tenant data alongside data from third parties to give a more detailed view of tenants' circumstances, and an asset management module to model the future profitability and financial requirements of housing providers' property portfolios.

Jenny McCulloch, director of product innovation, Housing Partners, said, "With housing providers having to manage multiple factors, from the implementation of universal credit to the introduction of the new HCA regulatory framework, being able to quickly identify tenants who need support, be alerted to those tenants who pose a potential risk or uncover issues with assets that require action is vital.

"Accurate and up to date data must be the bedrock of any business strategy and it is good quality tenant and asset information that underpins the new Housing Hub, giving our customers the insight and analytical capabilities that they need."

EAST KENT STREAMLINES IT WITH NORTHGATE PUBLIC SERVICES

Northgate Public Services is set to consolidate multiple IT systems at East Kent Housing into a single, unified solution in order to streamline its provision of housing services on behalf of Canterbury, Dover, Shepway and Thanet councils.

At the moment, East Kent's staff need to navigate across four different housing management systems which are only available from their offices. At the same time, the councils' tenants can only access a limited amount of housing or repair services online.

By replacing its four existing housing management systems with a single,



Paul Bartlett,
Single System
Project
Manager, East
Kent Housing

unified
solution from
Northgate
Public
Services,

East Kent expects to simplify and streamline different ways of working to improve productivity (including mobile working), increase tenant interactions and reduce duplication of effort.

For tenants, the new software will give them access to a comprehensive suite of

web portal applications across a range of services, including viewing rent accounts, making payments, reporting and querying repairs, requesting information or advice, completing online surveys and notifying the respective councils of changes of circumstances.

Paul Bartlett, single system project manager, East Kent Housing, said, "This is good news for our tenants and staff who can now look forward to being able to access our housing services more easily and quickly by using a single IT system across a range of services and locations."

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CIVICA COMPLETES KEYSTONE INTEGRATION

Civica has completed the integration and re-branding of its business with Keystone Asset Management Solutions after its acquisition of Keystone last year. The company also announced new sales of its latest housing management system, Cx and Keystone, at Bristol City Council and Clanmil Housing Association.

The underlying Keystone software is used by more than 130 organisations to plan, manage and maintain almost

two million assets. It enables housing providers to streamline and automate asset management, planned maintenance, inspections and component accounting, with improved control of current and future expenditure.

Combining the Keystone product range with Civica's Housing Cx, a cloud-based housing management system, means that Civica now offers a single, integrated housing platform.

Recently selected by Bristol City Council, Cx was chosen for its ability to integrate with the council's digital platform and to support council-wide initiatives for providing better online services to citizens and suppliers. Other contract wins for Cx include Fife Council, Havebury Housing Partnership, Monmouthshire Council and Local Space.

Clearview performs for Yarlington Housing

As part of its 2020 strategic plan, Yarlington Housing Group has implemented Clearview's performance management system in order to monitor and spot trends among the 20 'pledges' comprising its plan.

Yarlington Housing was originally looking for a system to monitor its KPI suite, in order to give accountability to its managers and enable trends in performance measures to be monitored. After viewing several options, Clearview was chosen and implementation began on Clearview's strategy, project and performance scorecard modules.

The main benefits of Clearview to Yarlington Housing and the basis for its implementation were that it would help to build a continuous performance improvement culture, provide the ability for paper-less meetings, automate the capture of KPI data from source systems and improve the transparency between the housing provider's corporate vision and its performance deliverables.

At first, the focus was on performance monitoring; over 400 measures were identified, defined and tracked on the system. Some team plans were monitored on Clearview alongside strategic delivery plans. A 'buddying' approach was taken for the leadership team to ensure good practice was shared and communicated; this was supported by a training plan for Yarlington Housing's staff. To emphasise the importance of the approach and the priority given to achieving the plan, every four months, the performance team hosted a Clearview '90-minute workout' to increase employee levels of awareness and buy-in.

Lara Almond, performance officer, Yarlington Housing Group, said, "At a team level, Clearview is becoming embedded into the way that we do things, with teams having their plans and the 'golden thread' to the corporate objectives monitored through the system. Performance measures can be viewed by anyone at Yarlington Housing and each team has a suite of performance measures which are reviewed and updated annually.



Lara Almond,
Performance
Officer,
Yarlington
Housing Group

"Implementing Clearview has transformed the way we can view and trend performance data. We are confident that the things we need to do to achieve our strategic plan are being done and the system is helping us to track and share our progress, along with increasing levels of employee engagement."



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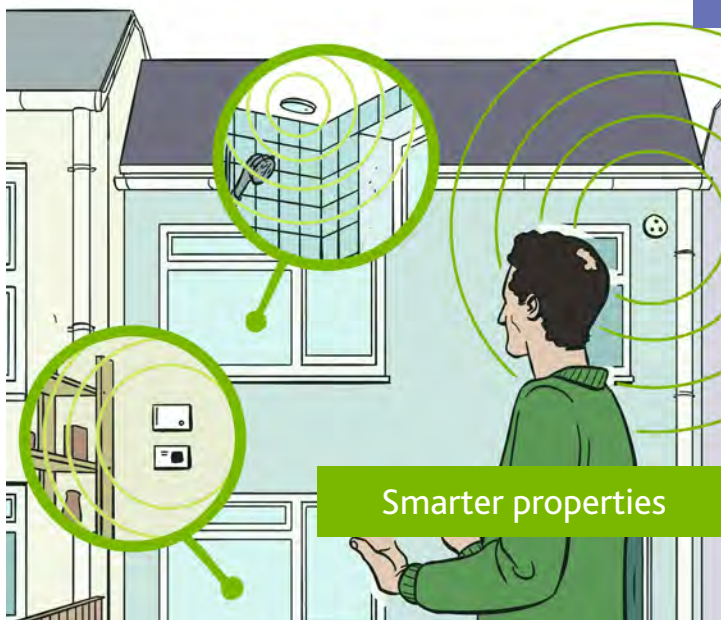


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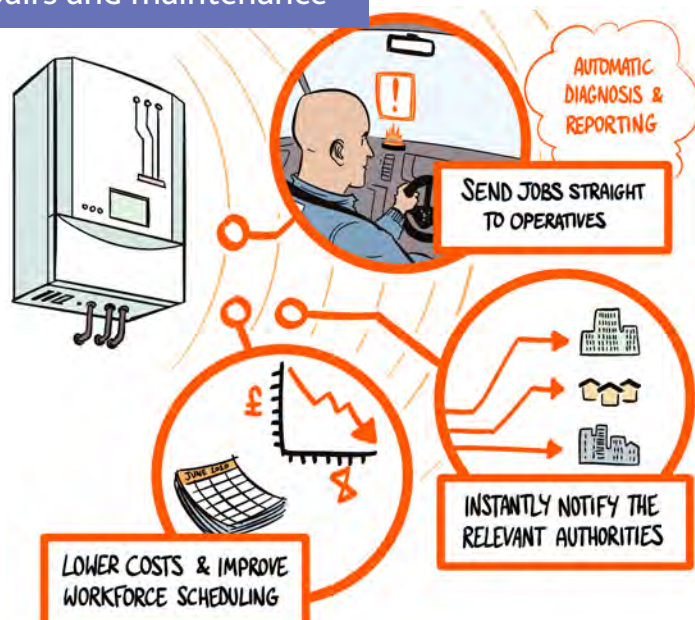


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WHAT IS ASSET MANAGEMENT IN 2015?

Paul O'Reilly, Senior Consultant, Aareon

Nobody currently active in the housing sector needs reminding that these are challenging times. Rarely has the sector faced such fundamental threats to its revenue stream as those posed by the advent of welfare reform and the extended right-to-buy. Housing providers are increasingly looking at other activities, some previously considered 'non core', to help bolster income levels. But another focus that must be considered is the maximisation of the asset base; 'sweating your assets' as you may like to term it. That's where I want to start in this examination of how technology can help the sector to focus on the longer term view of its assets as, well, assets.

I have been lucky enough to have been employed for some time by a company, Aareon, which provides software for housing providers not only in the UK but also in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and other countries. And in my dealings with colleagues from these countries, I have been able to gain a picture of how housing management works outside our home market.

Renting vs. owning

It's safe to say that, apart from the obvious language differences, the key differentiator that affects the software that Aareon provides in each market is tenure. While we in the UK have pretty much become Mrs Thatcher's ideal of a 'property-owning democracy' (in aspiration, if not in reality), with all of its attendant pluses and minuses, some of our other operating countries in Europe see renting as the normal mode of tenure. Flexibility, mobility and downright cultural normality have driven this, but it means that there is no real social stigma in renting a home in Europe, and so there are also very different organisations providing these rented properties.

In all our operating countries, there is what we would term 'social housing' to some degree or other. Using the CECODHAS Housing Europe's 2015 Report as a source, we can see that

| COUNTRY | SOCIAL/ PUBLIC RENT | PRIVATE RENT | OWNER OCCUPIED |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------|
| UK | 18% | 18% | 64% |
| NETHERLANDS | 33% | 7% | 60% |
| GERMANY | 4% | 51% | 45% |
| FRANCE | 17% | 2% | 57% |
| SWEDEN | 19% | 19% | 40% |

Note: not all of the figures for each country add up to 100% due to regional variations in property classifications and types.

the closest country to our model is the Netherlands.

The above table shows the width of variance in tenure type in our main operating countries – which presents equally-wide variations in requirements for housing management software.

Okay, but what does this have to do with the decline in the predictability of the UK sector's revenue stream? Quite a lot, I would argue, especially in the context of what technology can do to meet changing needs.

Commercial real-estate models

Let's go back to the idea that, unlike the UK, a significant number of housing providers in Europe operate either as fully private sector organisations, or as housing associations but along much more private sector lines. In fact, many see and term themselves 'real estate' companies. Hence, if you visit our international websites, you will see that term used a lot. Many housing associations offer not just rental services, but also property management for third parties, build for sale and management services. Rather than periodic charging of rent, which is the dominant practice in the UK, charges are invoiced and managed as aged debts.

However, it's not just about money. There is also, I have observed, a much greater focus on the long-term management of the property as a financial and social asset than has been the case in this country. In the Netherlands, for example, there is a significant emphasis on quality of life, which is summed up by the Dutch government thus: "Housing associations

are partly responsible for the quality of life in a neighbourhood. They prevent crime and remove graffiti, help organise street parties and other activities and provide money for play areas and sports facilities. The quality of life in a neighbourhood is also strengthened by the construction of schools and community centres."

And this requirement is where I am leading us to now, to get back to my original point.

Asset forecasting

For some years, we attempted to generate interest in the UK market for one of our group products, an asset-forecasting tool which brought with it the concept of long-term return on investment on a property or group of properties. This was being used in Germany by a number of housing providers as a strategic tool for high-level planning. In the UK, while we received some interest, the general reaction from the sector was that nobody could really see a use for it.

The general idea was that for a unit or scheme, you could combine 'hard' measures, such as future maintenance spend, rent charges and void losses, loan costs and other incomes/expenditures, with 'soft' measures such as quality of life issues; transport, schools, employment opportunities, and generate 'what if' scenarios to work out favourable scenarios for investment/divestment. So, for example, you could model the effects of a new school, transport route or employment area on your stock. I think this admittedly commercial approach put

WHAT IS ASSET MANAGEMENT IN 2015?

Continued from previous page

off a lot of people in the UK – the term 'portfolio management', which is what this is all about, was seen as rather a dirty word (or words).

Fast forward to 2015. We have found an increasing desire from some of our user base to provide a similar solution to the one I have just described. And, having done so, it's heartening for me to see that it is now being taken up, with some creative ideas about the kind of factors that some UK providers are wanting to model.

Planning ahead

I see this as a very powerful tool because with the financial squeeze comes an increasing imperative to manage your stock as a sustainable and relevant asset base and to inform a holistic view of asset management; for example, the

system might tell you that you need to spend £500,000 on new boilers in 2017, but the bigger question is "Is it going to provide a long term return, not just in pure spend, but will these properties be desirable and relevant to local needs? Or should we tackle quality of life issues such as local ASB before investing? Or should we look at changing the properties' use to cater for a different group's needs?" And when you also consider the non-financial aspects of the process, you will likely also want to look at social as well as financial value as a factor in your calculations. That is when your asset data, which is more than just the narrow stock condition information, begins to become really powerful.

Move forward another few years, and consider the potential of data gathered

automatically by smart devices such as sensors, which is then passed back to your core system. In this scenario, far more granular and accurate data will be available on both the performance of 'things' and the behaviour of people. This makes the potential of portfolio management even more exciting as a strategic tool, enabling housing providers to see more clearly the environment they are operating in and the effects of both their strategic decisions and the behaviour of their tenants.

Because real people live real lives in your properties, all your data is actually your asset data. And it might be one of your most powerful tools in the new climate that the sector faces, if you gather it, own it and manage it well.

Paul O'Reilly is a senior consultant at Aareon.

GENIELETS SIMPLIFIES RENT COLLECTIONS

Software company Geniebytes has developed a new web-based rent collection platform. GenieLets enables housing providers to manage all rent payments, contracts and reminders online.

Users simply input tenant and property information into the system and the application provides real-time payment details at the touch of a button while also highlighting tenants who are behind on scheduled payments.

Mandeep Dalvair, director, GenieBytes, said, "With GenieLets, housing providers can maintain control of contracts and payments, while tenants can make payments quickly and conveniently.

"GenieLets enables housing providers to be better organised by reducing management time and costs. The application offers a simple yet 'genius' way to manage rent payments online and alleviates the problems that can arise when managing property portfolios using less reliable rent management systems and processes."

The company is currently offering free three-month trials of GenieLets, which costs from £3/month for the standard management package.

Coastline Housing beats UK government borrowing

Although not strictly relating to technology in housing, it is nevertheless interesting to report that Coastline Housing has borrowed £23 million via the Affordable Homes Guarantees Programme at a cheaper rate than the UK government pays for its debt.

Coastline borrowed the money under a £500m funding programme agreed with the European Investment Bank, via Affordable Housing Finance which administers the £3.5 billion government guarantee programme for affordable housing.

The new funds will be used to strengthen Coastline's programme to develop more new homes for people in housing need in Cornwall. The housing provider has committed to delivering up to 660 homes over the next five years.

Coastline will draw down the funds at 0.15 per cent below gilts at a fixed cost of just 2.23 per cent. The loan is for 30 years and represents some of the cheapest ever debt secured in the sector. It is thought that this is the first time that housing

providers have borrowed at lower rates than the UK government.

Zoe Field, head of investment, Coastline Housing, said, "This new arrangement has saved us £850,000 per year compared with our business plan expectations."

PROCUREMENT HUB LAUNCHED BY PLACES FOR PEOPLE

Places for People has launched a new procurement service, offering a comprehensive bundle of IT services for itself and other housing providers to buy without getting caught up in lengthy procurement processes.

The housing provider's Procurement Hub comprises seven 'lots' of core software and hardware, delivered by five IT suppliers: Open Reality (client, server and storage hardware), Software One (licensing), XMA (mobile working and Apple devices), eReco (hardware disposal) and K3 FDS (outsourced IT).

Jon Thomson, IT director, Places for People, said, "Like any big organisation, managing such a large IT environment would be impossible without having access

to a reliable supply chain which offers the best value and a time-efficient service. The IT partners that we've met through the Procurement Hub framework have become an extension of our own teams to deliver leading-edge IT infrastructure and services for the group.

"The group's IT framework partners help us to ask the right questions about our operations, such as how we can guarantee the security of data when disposing of hardware, or what the ideal server design looks like for our particular requirements. These are questions that our peers should be asking of themselves; Procurement Hub's IT services framework is here to help provide the answers."



MOBILE WORKING

HYDE SELECTS 1ST TOUCH FOR MOBILE WORKING

Hyde Group has chosen mobile workforce software from 1st Touch to help deliver mobile working solutions to staff.



The new technology will be used at first by the group's incomes officers and then by other staff such as surveyors and housing officers. The mobile solution will deliver all the information and forms needed by an operative straight to their mobile device. These can include dates and times of appointments, payment information, stock data, services available to tenants and the forms required to access them online.

Paul Singleton, director of business transition and support, Hyde Group, said, "We wanted to ensure that we properly understood the requirements for a mobile system across the business. We identified what we needed to achieve and what benefits we could expect. As a result of that, we chose 1st Touch because we are confident in their ability to integrate

with our existing systems as well as their experience working successfully with other similar housing providers.

"One important feature is the system's ability to work with or without a signal so our employees don't need to interrupt their work if they are in an area with a poor signal. There will also be significant efficiency savings from having the details of tenant visits sent directly to our employees' devices at the beginning of each day, reducing travel times.

"In addition, staff would previously have had to wait until they went home or back to the office to input notes from tenant visits. With 1st Touch, they will be able to update Hyde's back-office systems in real time using their device while still with the tenant."



It's great when everything fits together perfectly

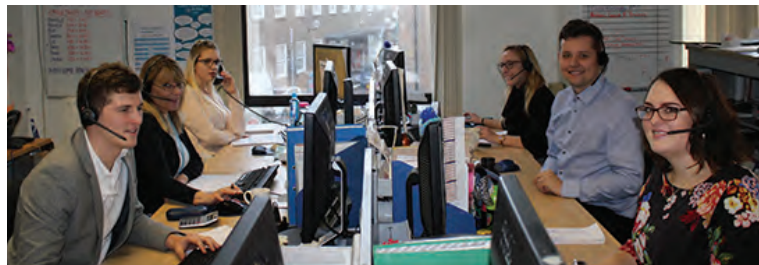
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WE MANAGE IT FOR YOU



Town & Country goes live with Dynamics CRM from Optevia



Town & Country Housing Group has gone live with Microsoft Dynamics CRM 2015, designed and deployed by CRM specialists Optevia, after a six-month implementation.

Based on Optevia's Social Housing Essentials, the new system enables users to handle their workloads better through automatic prioritisation, to better align services with tenant requirements, manage the capacity of individual employees, and to answer tenant queries at the first point of contact.

The housing provider now has 85 members of staff using the Optevia and Dynamics CRM system, including call-centre staff and housing and income managers. The system includes a series of built-in FAQs so that when tenants call, their queries can often be dealt with at the first point of contact. All queries are recorded in Dynamics CRM and reports can be produced to highlight the most popular queries.

Before the introduction of the new system, call-centre staff would have to email tenant requests to the income and housing managers; the response

times to these requests were often dependent on the order in which emails were read. Since then, Town & Country has identified which service requests require prioritisation so that income and housing managers can deal with the most pressing tasks first.

Jamie Barker, project manager, Town & Country Housing Group, said, "The system has now been live for only a few weeks but we have seen significant benefits already. It was our aim from the outset to increase our call centre's 'first-time fix' rate to 80 per cent and I am confident we will achieve that.

"Income and housing managers are already commenting on the significant decrease in the number of emails they receive and their improved ability to deal with tenant queries within service level agreements. The system is enabling us to ensure that the most urgent cases, such as offensive graffiti or domestic abuse, can be dealt with far more quickly and efficiently than before."

Town & Country's managers can now instantly see the progress of queries and which tasks are approaching

the SLA limit and take appropriate action. The system also provides more transparency on individual workloads and can help allocate work based on individuals' capacities.

Fran Merrin, a customer services adviser working in Town & Country's customer service centre and involved in testing the Dynamics CRM design before it went live, said, "The main difference between Dynamics CRM and the old system is that I now have everything in one place and I don't have to constantly switch screens to deal with a tenant's query.

"It is far easier to select the right case type, whether it's anti-social behaviour or special service requests, and the system routes requests automatically to the right income officer or housing manager, and the FAQs also make it very easy to answer queries on the phone."

The second phase of Town & Country's project is now underway, covering service charge enquiry handling, email and deeper integration with the main housing management system.

LIVERPOOL MUTUAL HOMES GOES LIVE WITH REDFERN



Liverpool Mutual Housing is now using Redfern's new Trips web portal to give its tenants round-the-clock access to arrange emergency accommodation. The housing provider is also using the same solution as a one-stop shop to buy and track its staff's business travel.

Amanda Sartorius-Jones, procurement officer, Liverpool Mutual Homes, said, "The system will improve LMH's responses to emergency incidents involving our tenants as accommodation and travel can be arranged in one transaction, whether online or through the emergency call service.

"The Trips booking and management system has also helped us to make efficiencies and savings by giving us more insight into what's being spent on business travel."

FREE AXONEX TABLETS FOR NEWYDD HOUSING

Cisco and datacentre specialist Axonex has given Newydd Housing Group a number of free tablet devices to help get more tenants online. The donation of the tablets is part of Axonex's project to upgrade the housing provider's telephony system.

Kevin Howell, community partnership manager, Newydd Housing Association, said, "We were delighted that Axonex could provide digital equipment for our tenants, as part of the community benefit element of providing us with an upgraded phone system. This showed a commitment to not only providing us with a service but also ensuring that the wider community benefited from the money spent. Many tenants are digitally excluded; the equipment that Axonex has provided will allow us to get even more tenants online."



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?

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DEALING WITH WELFARE REFORM AT GOLDEN GATES

Peter Fitzhenry, Managing Director, Golden Gates Housing Trust

The introduction of the bedroom tax and universal credit as components of the government's welfare reform programme, for which Warrington was a Pathfinder, was widely predicted to increase rent arrears and voids, leading to substantial losses in revenue for Golden Gates Housing Trust. The housing provider's managing director, Peter Fitzhenry, takes us through what it has done to respond to these issues by introducing better neighbourhood working and resident engagement at a time when it is most needed, and the significant benefits gained.

We decided that more face-to-face contact with our tenants was needed to help them with problems arising from the welfare reforms. A team of 28 people was re-structured from functional teams to one where each officer would be responsible for a geographic patch in the town, and be field- rather than office-based.

Our neighbourhood officers provide a broad range of services for tenants, going beyond the role of a conventional housing officer, and deal with:

- Low level anti-social behaviour;
- Untidy gardens, land issues & trees;
- Rent arrears;
- Liaising with tenants regarding property improvement works;
- Offering support to those affected by the benefit changes, in particular universal credit;
- Property viewing and new tenant sign-ups;
- Dealing with tenancy and estate management;
- Support for numeracy and literacy issues to tenants who need it.

The neighbourhood offices are the main point of contact for tenants and the interface between the tenant and Golden Gates' services.

The changes meant that we had to roll out a new IT system to give the neighbourhood officers access to all the data they need while out in the field and which traditionally they would have had to come into the office to download.

The new approach allows our staff to work closer with our tenants and to build stronger relationships with them. We can get a better idea of their circumstances and use this information to help tackle issues linked to health, financial difficulties, unemployment and digital exclusion.

The team is completely paperless, using iPads configured with Housing Support Pro software from Footprint Solutions. The software was configured to automate our new service forms to provide a quick and structured means of collecting information.

Neighbourhood officers can now provide several services in one visit to a tenant's home and spend more time on their specific patch. It also allows them to spend more time supporting and safeguarding our most vulnerable tenants and their families.

When meeting a tenant, the officer can call down any of the 40+ iForms which are already pre-populated with key reference data. The iForms are completed using keyboard, hand-

writing or voice, with the latter two being automatically converted to text. Fields on the iForm can be designated as mandatory to ensure the officer collects the minimum dataset to facilitate resulting processes. Tenant and officer signatures can be captured, photos can be taken and/or documents scanned, card payments collected, repairs arranged and central records updated, in real time direct from their iPads.

Our neighbourhood officers have also embraced social media, with many taking to Twitter; 10 of the team are actively using the social media site to tweet about specific issues and events which are taking place in their local patch, allowing tenants to keep up to date with what's going on and get instant feedback from their neighbourhood officer. Because we needed to deliver the system from scratch very quickly, an agile approach to development and delivery was adopted. The first phase of the system was designed, developed and implemented in four months.



DEALING WITH WELFARE REFORM AT GOLDEN GATES

Continued from previous page

A year after the embryonic system was implemented, very significant benefits have been achieved with cashable benefits in excess of £1 million.

During this past year, we realised that the technology adopted for our neighbourhoods system was also applicable to other parts of the business so more iForms have been developed and the number of users has more than doubled.

Once the first phase of the system had been completed, Footprint Solutions identified a possible market for it and they decided to

rebrand it as the Housing Support Pro app which has since been launched to the wider social housing sector.

One further development has been the release by Footprint Solutions of Works Connect, a complete repairs handling system, from the receipt of repairs requests through to final accounting. We have already implemented the system to handle the management and scheduling of repairs for the voids team; this will soon be extended to our planned and cyclical maintenance work and, in due course, to responsive repairs.

Finally, in recognition of the time it takes to go through the procurement process, and because we needed to go through the EU tender process anyway as costs were escalating as the system was being extended across the organisation, we decided to tender for a Framework Agreement, giving all social housing providers and local authorities ready access to the Housing Support Pro system and associated software and services.

Peter Fitzhenry is managing director of Golden Gates Housing Trust.



EMH'S TOP TIPS FOR PUTTING SERVICE FIRST

David Morris, Head of Customer Services, EMH Homes and Helen Bradford, Head of ICT, EMH Group

It is key for any housing provider to keep in close contact with its tenants, resolving any queries they may have, ensuring they are aware of the latest government regulations and how that affects their social and economic well-being.

EMH Group take these responsibilities seriously and they are embedded into our core values. That's why we are working with partners Montal and 5i, who in turn work with solutions provider Enghouse Interactive, to develop solutions that meet our tenants' needs, and why we have invested in the Enghouse Interactive Communications Centre system to coordinate our customer services operations.

When we bought our first CRM system, we only had a handful of customer service advisors but after significant growth, we now have more than 80 advisors. That growth, combined with the introduction of universal credit and other legislations, has crystallised our thinking about how to optimise the engagement process with our tenants.

Focus on what matters most to tenants

When faced with myriad new challenges, the best practice for housing providers

is often to take a step back and focus on what matters most to the tenants. Our tenants have consistently told us that it is the quality of the call-handling and the knowledge of the advisers that is most important to them. That's why when implementing the Enghouse Interactive Communications Centre, we wanted to invest in the associated call-recording and agent-evaluation software.

Put a focused team in place

It's a good idea to develop a dedicated customer experience team that can act as a central intelligence hub and manage all types of feedback coming into the organisation, such as compliments, complaints or general feedback through surveys. Having a central resource also makes it easier for you to establish escalation processes for problems that need urgent attention or rapid resolution.

Collaborate across the business

Whether you want to set up a new customer contact centre or just enhance your existing one, never view it purely as a customer service, IT or telephony project. Instead, you need to look at it as a business project that everyone across the business works on together. You need to engage with tenants and other

stakeholders to understand what kind of service they are looking for and how you are going to deliver it, what is likely to work and what investments you might need to make sure it happens.

Integrate your ICT systems

You don't want your staff to have to use multiple applications; it's confusing for them and inefficient. Use CTI integration to reduce the number of screens and applications your advisors need to use and you'll see productivity and efficiency benefits as a direct result.

Keep things simple for tenants

It's not just about making it straightforward for your own team; you need to make sure that the whole process is as simple as it can be for your tenants. Technology can help you achieve this, plus it's helpful to have just one inbound contact number, backed by a streamlined contact centre that can deal with queries received and by whatever channel.

David Morris is head of customer services at EMH Homes and Helen Bradford is head of ICT at EMH Group.



TRANSFORMING RHP'S ONLINE SERVICES

Amina Graham, Executive Director of Corporate Services, RHP

Amina Graham, executive director of corporate services at RHP, reports on how putting tenants at the heart of its new IT automation processes has had transformational benefits for both its tenants and the housing provider itself.

A key part of RHP's vision is to be one of the best service providers in the UK. We know that in order to achieve this vision, we need to be as easy to do business with as possible. In a sector where tenants traditionally have limited choice, we wanted to give them the choice, convenience and control to access our services, anytime, anywhere and from any device.

We started in 2012, where we used the Ocado model to become the first housing provider in the UK to offer two-hour appointment slots for repairs. Building on this, in April 2014 we developed our omni-channel strategy where we set out to improve our online services for our tenants – particularly those that involved transactions.

As a result of this, in the past 12 months we've seen:

- Tenants booking their own repairs appointment online go from just nine per cent to 62 per cent;
- Electronic rent payments increase to 98 per cent;
- Our web chat service has increased from 20 chats/month to 250 chats/month;
- Calls to our contact centre reduced by 30 per cent;
- Our social media 'Klout' score increase from 45 to 51.

We took a unique approach to deliver the strategy and, unlike other omni-channel programmes, ours didn't focus on technology as the primary driver but instead had an 'e-first' cultural transformation programme at its heart.

Putting our people at the heart of the change

To ensure that the omni-channel strategy was a success, it was vital to put employees at the heart of the change and nurture their talents to help them champion and embed the new way of doing things. Our delivery team and governance was structured in order to ensure:

- Strategic direction and alignment from our senior management teams: this was the pivot in helping us gain momentum quickly, and leading by example helped inspire the rest of the business to join in and get behind the move to online bookings;
- Support, engagement, and ownership of key changes: it was really important to engage all levels of the business to enthuse our employees about the change;
- Input from key stakeholders in the organisation to assure the delivery against our objectives.

It's not been easy. We've had to remain committed to our goal and our employees have been resilient and determined in guiding our tenants through the change.

The huge increase in the use of our online services, particularly the shift in repairs appointment bookings, has happened through a combination of well-trained customer service advisors selling the benefits and offering support to tenants where necessary, improvements to our technology to make it really easy to use, and developing consistent and clear messaging, both internally and externally.

It's not just our customer service advisors who know the score; ask any employee at RHP from a caretaker, a receptionist or someone in finance and they'll be able to tell you why we're so committed to driving more of our services online, both in terms of benefits to the tenants and to the business.

For those less confident, we've offered additional support through our digital champion initiatives. These are a group of employee and tenant volunteers who run computer clubs at our community centres, retirement schemes and our offices. As well as helping people to use RHP's services, these sessions open up the social and economic benefits of getting online by showing tenants how to do anything from paying a bill to Skyping a relative abroad. In the last year, our digital champions have helped over 350 tenants to get online.



We understand not all of our tenants have access to the web, so we've made sure all of our services are compatible with mobile first, and tablet and laptop second. We also have computers available at our offices and various community centres where tenants can

The aims of this programme were:

- To create an 'e-first' culture where our employees are enthused about e-service delivery and are empowered to support tenants to self-serve;
- To create a fully 24/7 model for service delivery, based on better use of e-channels for service delivery, such as online payments and booking tools, social media, and web chat;
- To reduce the cost to serve tenants and to increase capacity within our contact centre by migrating tenants online.



TRANSFORMING RHP'S ONLINE SERVICES

Continued from previous page

pop in to use our services and receive help where necessary.

Umbar Shakir, RHP's programme manager, said, "What RHP does really well is always looking to improve capability within its employees. Thanks to our executive directors and key departmental heads inspiring us to 'be bold', we have built a sense of pride and community in 'e-first' where each employee feels like they're part of something amazing and everyone has a part to play in achieving our target."

Continuing to lead the way

One year later and we now have a sector-leading 62 per cent of our tenants booking their repairs appointments online. Shakir said, "By moving more than 60 per cent of tenants online, RHP has debunked the myths that social housing

tenants don't follow general population trends and that tenants aren't digitally knowledgeable."

I'm personally delighted that in the first year of delivering the omni-channel strategy, RHP tenants and employees have both benefited. It's fantastic to be able to offer our tenants a better service any time, any place and on any device which reflects the way that they now want to interact with us. The move to more online services has delivered tangible business benefits by significantly reducing the volume of calls into the contact centre and improving our efficiency. Our repairs partner, Mears, has also benefited as tenants are less likely to cancel their appointment because they themselves have booked it for a time that's most convenient for them.

We're not stopping there. Our target for 2015/16 for repairs appointment bookings online is an ambitious 85 per cent. Since April this year, tenants have been able to see online the planned works for their home for the next five years, combined with the ability to rate the work in real time. This autumn, we will be launching our new website which will not only raise the bar in the housing sector in terms of design, tone and style, but it will make it even easier to access our services with key actions achievable in just a few clicks.

Amina Graham is executive director of corporate services at RHP.

AmicusHorizon improves tenant experience with Firmstep

AmicusHorizon is transforming its tenant services by deploying Firmstep's Customer Experience Platform to provide digital services, automate interactions with tenants and drive future digital service provisions.

Using Firmstep's Self and Forms solutions, the housing provider is giving tenants a personalised portal with a single sign-in access point for all customer services. Tenants can update their personal details and communication preferences, check the status of repairs, view rent statements and check payment histories online. Almost a third of AmicusHorizon's tenants have already signed up for the service since it was launched earlier this year.

The housing provider is now planning to further extend its digital service offering. Planned future developments to the online portal include repair requests, shared ownership applications, applications for additional properties such as garages, and requests for payment cards. Future channel-shift

projects will be guided by the improved data collected from tenants.

Suzanne Adams, programme manager, AmicusHorizon said, "We were looking for a secure, reliable and user-friendly way to transact with tenants online. Firmstep provided the functionality our existing CMS and CRM systems were lacking. The initial launch of the Firmstep platform has been hugely successful. We've seen early adoption rates of 30 per cent, with 64 per cent of those signed-up returning to use the portal. As we start to drive channel shift and offer more services online, we're confident that sign-ups and usage will continue to increase.

"When we put out the tender, we had a detailed plan of what we wanted to achieve and the customer journey we wanted to deliver. Firmstep's determination to deliver the project and the knowledge and support they provided enabled us to complete the build in just eight weeks and under budget."

Thurrock's tenants to self-serve with Northgate

Northgate Public Services has won a five-year contract with Thurrock Council for a suite of web portal services to support the council's tenants.

The Northgate Housing product suite will provide a council-wide online portal, from day-to-day housing management and repairs functions to self-service and mobile working. The system is intended to minimise data duplication and reduce the requirement for manual data entry, integrating with other systems in use within

the council. Other expected benefits include reduced training requirements, consistent reporting and better audit trails.

Dermot Moloney, strategic project lead, Thurrock Council said, "We selected Northgate Public Services' web based housing solution because we felt it matches the needs of the business and provides an integrated platform we can design around our processes. Its solution will help us to achieve our long-term objectives to deliver an effective service to our residents."



PROCESS AUTOMATION AT MHS HOMES

Nick Hadley, Head of ICT, MHS Homes

MHS Homes' head of ICT, Nick Hadley, reports on how the launch of the housing provider's 2015-18 strategic plan highlights its ambitions to use process automation to enhance the tenant experience and make cost savings. Its key objective is to be financially fit and lean by implementing procurement practices that deliver better control and contribute to a target of £300,000 of cost savings.

The ICT team at MHS Homes is planning to implement a P2P (purchase-to-payment) system by the end of this financial year to reduce paper use and manual data entry. The P2P system will be able to automatically match purchase orders to invoices using OCR (optical character recognition) by reading the information contained in the invoice and inputting this into the payment software.

This will streamline the payment process to allow us to pay suppliers much faster, while reducing the risk of human error or fraud. This system will assign the invoice to the appropriate budget holder. This will save time when dealing with supplier enquiries as budget holders will be able to view the progress of their invoice in real time without contacting the finance team.

Streamlining ordering & invoicing

The finance team already automates some processes through certification. Repairs operatives can order materials for jobs when out of the office and we can raise a certificate for the total cost of all of the jobs, allowing the supplier to invoice us in one go, rather than processing one invoice for each order raised. This streamlines the entire order process and reduces the time taken to make the payment when compared with processing multiple invoices.

The move towards automated services will also benefit other front-line staff such as surveyors and housing officers. Commonly-used forms will be put onto tablets so the data can be input electronically outside the office, rather

than printing the form and filling it out manually, before entering the data onto a PC when they return to the office.

Tenant self-service

Alongside cost savings, MHS Homes wants to enable tenants to self-serve 24/7. Recent improvements to the online tenant portal, introduced in June this year, make the portal fully optimised for smartphones and easier to navigate on all devices. In the near future, it will also allow tenants to not only report repairs online, but also book an appointment at a time that suits them.

The portal shows all available appointments for the particular trade required in real time, and syncs with software used in the office to always show the latest data. This means that staff will no longer need to contact tenants to book in appointments, which will bring cost savings and allow tenants to book an appointment more quickly.

A key business objective for 2015-18 is to take a leading edge and innovative approach to service delivery, using new technology to deliver excellent customer service.

The customer service centre wants to enhance its existing contact management software, provided by Cisco, to bring all contact channels into one place and queue them for the customer service advisors to answer. This includes existing channels such as email and telephone, as well as new channels we plan to introduce later this year, such as live chat. The technology will also allow us to schedule outbound dialling, with calls automatically allocated to customer service advisors, and will automatically populate the CRM.

Forecasting for CRM

Additionally, the customer service centre plans to introduce a new workforce management system, provided by Injixo. This will forecast future contact volumes, allowing us to accurately predict how

many staff we need to cover each contact channel. Injixo takes into account multiple factors, including past trends, scheduled campaigns and bank holidays, to configure the rotas for each day. This will allow us to manage the workforce more efficiently and give customer service advisors the ability to log into the system to check or change their shifts.

We have recently joined the Connected Home Consortium, which was set up by housing professionals interested in technology and innovation to explore how the Internet of Things can change the way we deliver our services. Membership of the consortium will give us access to advice about the best use of new technology, a way to share best practice and inclusion in pilot projects.

For the remainder of the strategic plan, our ICT team will monitor new trends in the Internet of Things and the positive impacts these could have on our service delivery. In the future, this technology could be used to automate processes even further to enhance tenants' lives such as using sensors to allow us to conduct predictive repairs, measure condensation in the home, or using smart technology in adapted properties to allow tenants to control electrical appliances from their smartphones.

Nick Hadley is head of ICT at MHS Homes.

PLUS DANE OFFERS LOOKING LOCAL APPS

Looking Local has completed the development of two new apps supporting health and financial wellbeing for Plus Dane tenants, encompassing both Plus Dane's various housing services as well as complementary services from external government agencies.

In addition to services such as repairs reporting, paying rent and requesting appointments, Plus Dane's new digital solution provides support tools beyond housing. The two apps bring together services including Universal Jobmatch, The Money Advice Service, Universal Credit and NHS Choices.

The apps help tenants search for employment and provide job-hunting tips. Users can also calculate their benefits entitlement, book a doctor's appointment and check health symptoms.

Plus Dane's tenants can use the apps to request demonstrations of the community alarm, report instances of anti-social behaviour, log complaints, or leave

compliments. They can also play their part in maintaining their local environment, with a street-scene reporting function for issues such as road repairs, dumped rubbish, faulty street lights and graffiti.

The apps were built by public sector-owned technology developer Looking Local using its own MyLandlord platform. The free apps for iOS and Android can be downloaded by tenants from Apple's iTunes and Google's Playstore. The same information can also be accessed by tenants through Sky and Virgin digital television channels, making them accessible to as many tenants as possible.

Kelly Arnold, digital inclusion officer, Plus Dane, said, "We are focusing on improving tenants' digital skills and we are particularly keen to make employment opportunities and advice readily available. LookingLocal's apps make job-hunting and a range of other services straightforward and convenient."



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STREAMLINED HOUSING – PROCESS AUTOMATION WITH IT

Housing Technology interviewed IT experts from 1st Touch, Civica, Horton Housing Association, New Charter Group and Town & Country Housing Group about how housing providers can use technology to automate some of their key processes, for both business improvements and cost-savings as well as to help tenants.

Where to start?

Rather than considering the details of how to automate specific processes, this article covers how housing providers can streamline their general operations by using technology to automate many repetitive (and often paper-based) processes. As with most activities, the 80/20 rule very much applies; perhaps 80 per cent of housing providers' operations lend themselves to cost-effective automation, but the remaining 20 per cent will either be too expensive, complicated or risky to automate.

As with Sam Young, director of business transformation at New Charter Group, said, "Like all technology projects, the easiest things to automate are repetitive tasks, where rules or logic prevail and the answer is always black and white; put simply, things that don't need a human touch. However, it's very easy to simply automate bad processes; the starting point always needs to be whether the process is necessary, whether it is efficient and, importantly, whether the tenant is the focus.



"Reducing data duplication is a huge area for cost savings. Once data is digitised and centralised, it opens up much more scope for process automation."

Jamie Barker, Project Manager,
Town & Country Housing Group

"A less obvious thing to automate is business intelligence for more of a 'big data' picture. New Charter has now automated our management information to support service delivery in a vastly reduced timescale compared with manual processes, we can automate the link with other external data such as crime or loan-shark data to help us make decisions on targeting resources and interventions, and we can automatically link together varying data types to help us plan our medium- and long-term service needs."

Civica's managing director for housing and asset management, Jeff Hewitt, said, "The easiest areas to automate are those that are possibly the least automated in the first place, such as arrears collections. However, while a lot of IT solutions allow automation, there is often a reticence to fully automate services where there are legal implications if any mistakes are made. For systems to become truly automated, housing providers need solutions that are robust enough for companies to feel secure about automatically initiating the next steps of a recovery process, for example."

Robert Dent, CEO of 1st Touch, added, "One of the most testing aspects of process automation is mapping the automation criteria clearly at the beginning, particularly if too many people are involved in the process. Quite simply, this 'too many cooks' scenario is likely to mean that too many conflicting opinions are in play, resulting in delays and project slippage. Of course, one can set objectives for what the IT solution needs to deliver in terms of efficiency, productivity and/or service improvements and how these objectives are defined and measured, but in the housing sector, there may be other criteria to consider, such as tenant satisfaction or whether the solution will meet value-for-money targets.

"Another potential hazard to bear in mind is staff morale. If the introduction of automated processes is handled badly, many staff might immediately think that their jobs are threatened, whereas in reality it normally means simply reallocating existing staff to other parts of the business."

Measuring the savings

In most instances, process automation using IT is all about a combination of productivity gains and cost savings. As a consequence, the preparations and efforts needed to do so make it relatively easy to measure the 'before' and 'after' scenarios and the contingent benefits.

Martin Nowak, a software project manager at Horton Housing Association, said, "The main cost savings of process automation via IT are linked to time-consuming tasks as well as any paper-based activities. Reducing the time it takes to carry



"Like all technology projects, the easiest things to automate are repetitive tasks, where rules or logic prevail and the answer is always black and white."

Sam Young, Director of Business
Transformation, New Charter Group

out a particular task is a key factor, such as being able to automatically import housing benefit entitlements in an electronic format into a housing management system instead of manually inputting the details. Also, having a direct interface between different systems brings significant cost savings; instead of re-keying the same information twice, users can put it in once and bring the information across to the other systems via the interfaces."



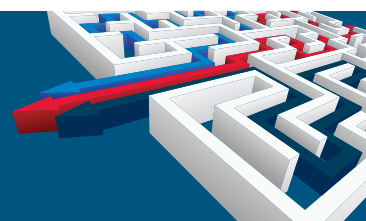
"One of the most testing aspects of process automation is mapping the automation criteria clearly at the beginning, particularly if too many people are involved in the process."

Robert Dent, CEO, 1st Touch

Jamie Barker, a project manager at Town & Country Housing Group, which has recently gone live with a CRM system from Optevia, said, "Aside from the obvious benefits of reducing the need for manual interactions, reducing data duplication is a huge area for cost savings. While there's currently a lot of focus on data duplication in the context of mobile working, there is still massive potential to reduce duplication in the back office by centralising data and then using CRM to automate many of your processes. Once data is digitised and centralised, it opens up much more scope for process automation.

"In terms of measuring the time and cost savings, you can do 'time and motion' studies to see how long it takes to complete a manual process compared to an automated one, plus you can look at how often you are capturing the same information and calculate the cost implications of doing so. For example, 'date of birth' is a classic one; despite it never changing, how often do you ask tenants for their date of birth?"

Civica's Hewitt added, "The main cost savings come from efficiencies in people



time. If you can speed up decision making and the escalation of cases, work will be passed around an organisation much faster. This will result in faster responses to tenants, a reduction in the number of complaints and a better tenant service overall. The measurement aspect is simple; it's how long it takes to vet an arrears process, for example; if you can reduce this, then you can make big savings in time spent and costs."

Additional benefits

Automating housing providers' existing processes often deliver benefits beyond the strictly empirical measures of 'how much?' or 'how long?' and extend into wider areas of housing providers' operations.

1st Touch's Dent said, "For tenants, self-service apps allow them to instantly transact with their housing provider without needing to wait for a phone to be answered or an email response. And for field-based workers, process automation and mobile working mean that they can not only carry out more visits per day but also complete more activities while actually with tenants without the need for interaction with other staff members.



"The easiest areas to automate are those that are possibly the least automated in the first place, such as arrears collections."

Jeff Hewitt, Managing Director for Housing & Asset Management, Civica

"Whether it's tenant satisfaction or staff productivity, these can be measured by clearly defining the current manual process and collating data that measures the time, effort and cost of performing any given function. This can then be benchmarked against automated processes and the speed at which those processes can complete the same tasks. The measurements should also take into account any assets that may be saved through those automated tasks, such as closing satellite offices because staff can spend more time in the field and no longer need a local office to update information or locate any paper files needed for field visits."

New Charter's Young said, "Sometimes the benefits are surprising and ones

we didn't anticipate. For example, when we automated the processes around our repairs service, we introduced diagrammatic interfaces that allowed us to model a house and precisely pinpoint the repair on these pictures. In our customer service hubs, these interfaces also mean that when tenants come in, they can point to the problem on the pictures, overcoming any language or knowledge barriers, which in turn improves our rates for 'first-time fixes', repairs get completed faster, and helps maintain the overall standard of our properties."

Helping your tenants

Using IT to automate business processes shouldn't be confined to well-established internal processes, such as chasing arrears or processing tenancy agreement. It should be expanded to include tenants and external agencies, such as contractors, in the form of an extended supply chain, linked together using a single set of up-to-date and accurate data.

Civica's Hewitt said, "The speed and accuracy of response to tenants is crucial. If you're a tenant, you want your housing manager to always have access to the most up-to-date information on your account but tenants are often frustrated by the time it takes to manually process cases. If we look at the way we bank, customers expect a real-time view of their transaction history and balance every time they log into their online account or visit a branch, so why should tenants expect anything less from their housing provider?"

"For example, our Housing Cx solution offers the full capability of a powerful housing management system on all devices, including laptops, tablets and mobiles, so the most up-to-date information can be accessed and updated on site visits. This reduces bottlenecks and eliminates errors, often caused by problems with synchronising or re-keying data."

New Charter's Young said, "Process automation improves the speed and accuracy of our services and helps ensure we get it right first time. Automation also means you can open up your processes for tenants to use directly, at any time and using their preferred channel. However, one potential pitfall is that, from a tenant's

point of view, it is important that the automation allows them to do the thing they want to, rather than just following the housing provider's own internal processes."



"It's useful to have some processes automated as standard, without any user intervention, such as weekly reports, because it delivers consistency across the board and it's easier to control by the IT department."

Martin Nowak, Software Project Manager, Horton Housing Association Specialist, Intercity Telecom

Town & Country Housing's Barker added, "Process automation enables a consistent approach to the delivery of housing providers' services. By automating processes, it allows us to expose those processes from solutions such as Microsoft Dynamics CRM 2015 to mobile working and self-service. With mobile working, it means you start, work on and complete processes when required and don't have to wait until you are next in the office.

"And by exposing processes to self-service, tenants can interact with us at a time convenient to them and start a process without needing to speak to us directly. The progress of those processes can then be tracked by tenants within the self-service environment, reducing the need for them to call us for a progress update. Automation also enables enhanced collaboration for cross-cutting processes by routing tasks to the right people at the right time."

Direct automation vs. business-led automation

Some processes are suitable for what might be termed 'direct automation', where the process has no human involvement at all, such as the delivery of regular, standardised reports to the board on the state of a housing provider's overall operational position. For other processes, the role of the IT department is to give end-users the tools they need to create their own bespoke automated processes without the need for the constant involvement of the IT department.

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STREAMLINED HOUSING - PROCESS AUTOMATION WITH IT

Continued from previous page

1st Touch's Dent said, "It's important to start with the result or output you are looking for and let that influence the methods used to automate tasks. For example, many housing providers think that because they know about the business processes, using a tool to map these and design the automated process might appear to be an attractive proposition. However, this is offset by the complications that arise within housing, where there are workflows and automated tasks that interact across a number of applications and databases."

Horton Housing's Nowak said, "It's useful to have some processes automated as

standard, without any user intervention, such as weekly reports, because it delivers consistency across the board and it's easier to control by the IT department. On the other hand, giving users a platform to create and produce their own reports allows them to be independent and less reliant on IT."

Town & Country Housing's Barker said, "There will always be a need for IT to directly support some process automation due to complexities such as coding and integration, but this requirement is diminishing with solutions such as Dynamics CRM. Business analysts are now empowered

to develop business processes through configuration tools without the need to code. This is a great leap forward that opens up a massive opportunity to build real agility into process design and automation. Furthermore, processes developed or co-developed by the business will see greater ownership by the business rather than seeing them as 'just another IT project'."

Housing Technology would like to thank Robert Dent (1st Touch), Jeff Hewitt (Civica), Martin Nowak (Horton Housing Association), Sam Young (New Charter Group) and Jamie Barker (Town & Country Housing Group) for their expertise and editorial contributions to this article.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Grenfell Housing's cloud desktops from WorkPlaceLive



Following its decision to modernise and improve the reliability of its IT infrastructure and enable all staff to work remotely, Grenfell Housing & Training has implemented cloud-based desktops from WorkPlaceLive, a preferred supplier for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and a specialist in providing cloud-based services for non-profit organisations.

Outsourcing the IT systems to WorkPlaceLive has also enabled Grenfell Housing to get rid of its servers and associated cooling equipment, and Grenfell's IT and facilities manager no longer has to maintain and oversee this equipment so has more time to focus on other business-critical work.

A further benefit is that any IT issues can now be resolved faster. The team viewer software used by WorkPlaceLive's customer helpdesk enables most problems to be dealt with remotely, without the need for a technician to come out to the charity.

DELTA-EE'S VIEW OF IoT IN HOUSING

A recent report from research consultancy Delta-ee has identified four battles shaping the future of the Internet of Things (IoT) in the housing sector.

The 'connected home' market is expected to be shaped by:

- What becomes the reference radio and communication protocol;
- The different ways to make devices interact with each other in the absence of true interoperability;
- Having a fixed in-home device which will replace the cloud in the temporary absence of internet in the house;
- Being at the centre of the house by providing an IoT platform.

Delta-ee reported that wi-fi is in a strong position to be the

winning connected home communication protocol because it's backed by a strong mobile industry, where billions of devices come with it already embedded. At the same time, wi-fi devices don't require a gateway to connect to the cloud; this is another advantage as an extra white box to connect to the cloud can be expensive, hardly upgradable and seen as unnecessary in the eyes of consumers.

Arthur Jouannic, senior analyst, Delta-ee, said "Platforms with gateways such as Google's Nest or Samsung's Smart Things will need to justify the cost of this extra device. It will have to be able to run all the connected devices of the house when the internet connection is lost and to store information, download and process apps."

FAMILY MOSAIC FOCUSES ON MICROSOFT LICENSING WITH PHOENIX SOFTWARE

Phoenix Software has helped Family Mosaic to reduce its Microsoft licensing costs by 20 per cent, despite significant changes to Microsoft's licensing arrangements for housing providers.

Like most housing providers, Family Mosaic is a heavy user of Microsoft software for the day-to-day running of its business, partly because housing providers used to qualify for discounts of up to 80 per cent on their software through Microsoft's Select Academic licensing. As a result Family Mosaic runs 27 different lines of Microsoft software, from Exchange and SQL Server to the complete suite of Office products. However, when Microsoft announced in 2012 that housing providers would no longer qualify for Select Academic licences, Family Mosaic faced significant increases to its software costs when its three-year agreement expired earlier this year.

Nick Crane, head of IT operations, Family Mosaic, said, "With over two years to go until our agreement was due for renewal, we had time to put together a strategy. We knew that our software bill was going to go up a lot so we needed to minimise the cost increases wherever possible.

"This meant aligning our software purchases to our requirements more closely while using the most efficient licensing agreements. But with over 2,500 users, more than 200 sites and 27 different product lines, we knew this was easier said than done."

When Microsoft announced its licensing changes, Family Mosaic had already virtualised 95 per cent of its IT estate, including all 1,500 desktops running as Citrix thin clients. While virtualisation had resulted in significant operational and capital cost savings, it had also resulted in a much more complicated licensing scenario.

Crane said, "Microsoft SQL Server, Visio and Project are particularly difficult to license under virtualised environments

due to the licences being device-centric rather than user-centric. We found that the compliance goalposts for these applications tended to move on a regular basis, particularly when they are deployed on virtualised estates."

As a long-standing IT supplier to Family Mosaic, Phoenix Software was invited to tender for a licensing renewal and software optimisation project along with two other companies. Once all three tender responses had been reviewed, Family Mosaic selected Phoenix for the renewal of its Microsoft Enterprise Agreement. For software optimisation, it also signed up to Focus, Phoenix's licence-management-as-a-service (LMaaS) solution for the ongoing maintenance of its compliance position. Family Mosaic also deployed AppSense for application management to deal with the subtleties of Microsoft Visio and Project licensing.

The first step in the Focus service was to conduct a thorough baseline of Family Mosaic's software requirements in order to find out where any software savings could be made. At the end of the process, Phoenix presented Family Mosaic with an up-to-date effective licensing position (ELP) which highlighted any mismatches between the organisation's licensing entitlements and its usage. This enabled the housing provider to retire any excess licences (i.e. overspend) while any shortfalls could be paid for from the savings. The end result was a fully-optimised licensing position which minimised Family Mosaic's exposure to the pending Microsoft price rises.

As a managed service, Phoenix's Focus service also provides Family Mosaic with ongoing maintenance and management of its software compliance during the full term of the Enterprise Agreement. This includes on-demand access to its compliance position and all necessary documentation, plus a complete company-wide ELP conducted by Phoenix's experts twice a year.

This ensures that Family Mosaic will never pay for more software than it needs to and also has the added peace of mind that it is fully compliant. In the event that Microsoft ever asks Family Mosaic to prove its compliance with a software audit, Family Mosaic can now respond within just a few days with minimal disruption to its day-to-day operations.

Following the initial analysis of Family Mosaic's software requirements, Phoenix and Family Mosaic worked with Microsoft to renew the company's three-year Enterprise Agreement. Family Mosaic was particularly keen to have more flexibility in its software usage during the course of the new three-year agreement so a flexible subscription model was negotiated whereby certain entitlements can be scaled up or down according to usage. Paying by subscription has also helped Family Mosaic to shift more of its software spending into operational costs.

With additional analysis of the licensing cost implications of the housing provider's predominantly virtualised infrastructure, Phoenix worked out that that de-virtualising Family Mosaic's SQL Servers would yield additional cost savings. And in the end, when it came to renewing its Enterprise Agreement and facing a like-for-like substantial increase in software costs through the loss of its discount, Phoenix was able to reduce Family Mosaic's forecasted software bill by 20 per cent.

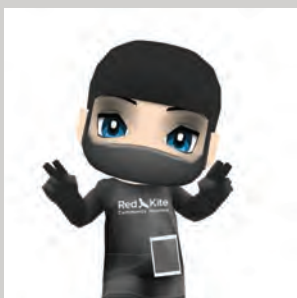


HOW TO BE AN IT NINJA...

Adam Rigg, New Media & Channel Specialist, Red Kite Housing

I'm not a real ninja. Let me just state that from the outset. I'd like to be, but I have a bad back, I'm from Hartlepool, and I'm not physically very agile....

...Or am I (raises ninja eyebrow)?



The word agile is used a lot at the moment, in different contexts and often meaning completely different

things. For me, it means having the ability to react quickly to your surroundings. That could be as a product, a company or as a developer. Many of us do this without even realising it.

With innovative new technologies being developed at a fantastic rate, a variety of cloud-based platforms now offer quick, flexible and cheap solutions to housing providers across the globe. So why do some of us use the proverbial bad back to shy away from trying tech in an agile manner?

Hands up if you've tried streaming, mobile forms, webchat, instant messaging, dynamic scheduling, cloud apps or a talking avatar? Not many hands up there, I bet. It's what your tenants want even if they don't know it, so why not? Sure, you might get the odd naysayer sneering that your organisation is crazy for using such things but, as we all know, crazy people change the world; what did people say the first time they saw Jimi Hendrix play guitar with his teeth? Or the first time Einstein mentioned relativity? Or when... well you get the idea.

Crazy isn't always bad. Only sometimes; ever heard of the banana-fuelled car? No, me neither.

Why should we be tech ninjas?

Even if trying new apps or cloud-based solutions can't give you exactly what you want straight away, at least trying them on an agile (there's that word again) basis

can get you out of the starting blocks. It seems like everybody now has a tablet, smartphone and laptop at their fingertips and are using the thousands of apps available on the various stores day and night. So why don't businesses do the same? You could argue that "economies of scale are to blame", "it's difficult to implement such things", "you have to be very careful" and "what if you embrace Twitter one month and then everyone stops using it the month after – what a waste of time that would be!" (by the way, people are not going to stop using Twitter any time soon).

Well, as it happens, you don't need to develop your own digital platforms from scratch, you don't even need to be the first ones to use it within your sector, you just need to embrace it and see potential in its benefits, such as a few of these examples below.

Social media

A great example of the rapid increase in social media uptake is the mighty Facebook; it started off way back in 2004 and now has nearly one and a half billion users. If you work that out (and yes, I am sad enough to do that) that's around four people joining Facebook every second non-stop for the past 11 years – not a bad take up, really. So can you believe there are some organisations out there that still don't have a corporate Facebook account? Think of all of the tenants you could be engaging with via that platform that you currently can't reach because you're not sure Facebook "fits your company image". The same could be said for many of the other growing social networks – Twitter, Instagram, Google+, Youtube, the list goes on and on.

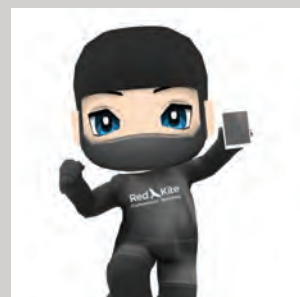
I'm not suggesting you open up 47 social media channels but you should be thinking about your tenants and their preferred ways of communicating. Pick the right ones and consider a social media management tool to make keeping an eye on them easier; Sprout Social or Hootsuite are both good examples and are cheap and easy to implement.

Webchat

If only there was a nice quick way for your company to deal with easy, frequently-asked questions as soon as someone visits your website. It would save everyone a lot of time and hassle. Hang on an agile ninja-related second, there is. It's called webchat and it's already taking over websites like nobody's business. Now with some cloud-based platforms such as Tawk offering free services, why wouldn't you offer this channel to your tenants? A real no-brainer. Give it a try. Be a ninja.

Mobile working

Only 12 months ago staff in my organisation were going out to visit tenants with a pen. And a bit of paper. And a smile. They were then writing things down, coming back to the office and typing up their notes into our back-



office system. Mobile devices have already changed the way businesses across the globe

operate. If you don't already operate mobile working, then you are missing a trick – it will save you and your tenants time and money. If you're not sure exactly what you want or where to start, why not try some cheap interim measures to get you going? Look at cheap Android devices, then look at online scheduling platforms (such as Booking Bug). It might not be the long-term answer for you but it's relatively cheap to get going and will give you a steer for how to progress. Combine this with a cheap or free forms platform, like Google Forms or Device Magic Forms and you are ready to go. Like an agile ninja from planet Technology, ready to dart and dodge wherever you need to.

Streaming

Up Periscope? No, that's not a euphemism, it's a video-streaming

HOW TO BE A NINJA...

Continued from previous page

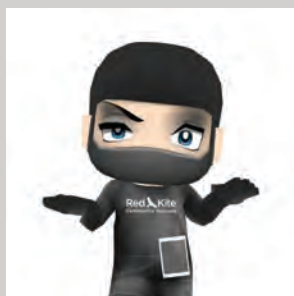
platform from Twitter. Imagine streaming your latest initiatives live to your tenants and instantly getting their feedback. Some say "it's too early to rely on this platform", others say "give it a try, it might be perfect for you". Some people say all of this and more, while streaming to you live from a field in Tamworth.

Mobile apps

Everyone's got an app, surely? Nope. Many companies are put off having an app because they think you have to pay some developer bundles of cash to build one for you but that's no longer the case. As with the growing popularity of drag-and-drop website design platforms, there is now a similar surge in easy-to-use online app builders. Check out iBuildapp, appypie and apps-builder for examples of how cheap and easy it is to get your app groove on.

Okay then, I want my ninja suit!

I realise that while I am very lucky to work at such a forward-thinking organisation, Red Kite Community Housing, that



embraces technology with open arms, some of you may not have that support and have internal hurdles to

overcome, but don't give up, tech ninjas don't quit!

When most people look at new technology, they tend to have one of three reactions:

- Wow, that's cool;
- I could use that to do this;
- I don't understand and I'm scared, so I'll pretend it's rubbish.

You can class yourself as a tech ninja if you can get firmly in the "I could use that to do this" category. Soon your organisation will be in a much better place, your tenants will be much happier with the ease at which they can access your services and, of course, the more tech ninjas are out there, the more improvements, developments and innovative concepts we will produce.

Remember, all ninjas have to start somewhere. Now excuse me while I fade mystically into the shadows... Ouch, who put that lamp there?

Adam Rigg is a new media and channel specialist at Red Kite Housing.

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ALL CHANGE ON GOVERNMENT'S PROCUREMENT FRAMEWORK

Harry Metcalfe, Managing Director, DXW

Harry Metcalfe, managing director of DXW, a digital service provider to the public sector, provides an update on the latest government initiatives to provide a workable procurement framework for agile digital services.

The successful development of user-focused digital services is a vital part of housing's future. Increasingly, tenants will demand these solutions. But even if they don't, tightening resource constraints and the need to reduce costs and increase efficiency will make them necessary. The government is keen to encourage such innovation, and has been developing the Digital Services framework to help the public sector engage with agile service providers.

Unfortunately, not much progress has been made so far. In February this year, we united with a host of SMEs to criticise the government's Digital Services 2 (DS2) framework because, to us, it seemed unfit for purpose. It required each supplier to write a small novella (14,000 words) to join the framework. It established costs via a reverse auction; a race to the bottom that would inevitably damage outcomes. And it encouraged 'body shopping'; dropping individuals into projects with no team and minimal support. It seemed to recognise no value of a potential supplier's experience

of solving real user problems, or the effectiveness of an experienced team.

The good news is that the Government Digital Service has recognised these issues, and radical changes to the purchasing frameworks are on their way.

Writing in a blog post in June, Tony Singleton, the GDS programme's commercial director, said, "It has become clear from user research that Digital Services needs to be completely redesigned to the extent that it will essentially be a new framework. We're even considering giving it a new name that more accurately reflects its purpose."

The update explains that the new framework will be focused around three distinct needs:

1. Engaging a team to take on a particular project;
2. Bringing in digital specialists;
3. Access to 'resources', such as user research labs and finding research participants.

There will also be no reverse auction, instead a 'straightforward' evaluation for suppliers wishing to get onto the framework and more detailed assessments when individual contracts are set. Excitingly, there will be a period

of supplier engagement and consultation about the general approach, the proposed contract and the ITT before the OJEU tender is published.

I'm really optimistic about this. Re-orientating the digital services framework around teams, specialists and supporting resources is a much more sensible approach; a closer fit to both the needs of buyers and the capabilities of suppliers.

Public sector procurement departments need to understand that good companies are more than the sum of their parts, and attempts to make tender responses comparable so that purchasing is based on objective assessments of value can squeeze out creativity and innovation. A good digital agency is not just about headcount and responses to a questionnaire, but about culture, process and shared experience.

I'm looking forward to lots more useful and interesting conversations at the consultation stage. I'm convinced that an open process like this is the fastest way to genuinely innovative service that will benefit end users, and the more people who pitch in to that process, the better.

Harry Metcalfe is managing director of DXW.

New apprentices join Salix Homes

As regular readers will know, Housing Technology is a great supporter of housing providers' apprenticeship schemes so we're delighted to report that Salix Homes in Salford has just taken on nine new apprentices (from 150 applicants) in its environmental maintenance and security teams. Salix Homes also reported that it was one of the first housing providers in the country to pay its trainees the Living Wage.

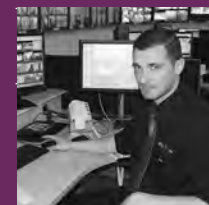
One of the new apprentices is Salix Homes' tenant Paul Vella who has joined

the housing provider's security team after facing homelessness. He said, "I had been out of work for about six months and had been looking for a permanent job or training opportunity. This is just everything I wanted and I'm loving it. I have a new home, a new job and it's made such a huge difference to my life."

Sue Sutton, executive director of operations, Salix Homes, said, "We are very proud of our apprenticeship programme which exists to help tenants like Paul to create a better life for themselves.

"Salix Homes is able to invest significantly in Salford thanks to tenants voting to transfer their homes from the council to us,

so as part of that we are creating hundreds of new jobs and training opportunities for local people."

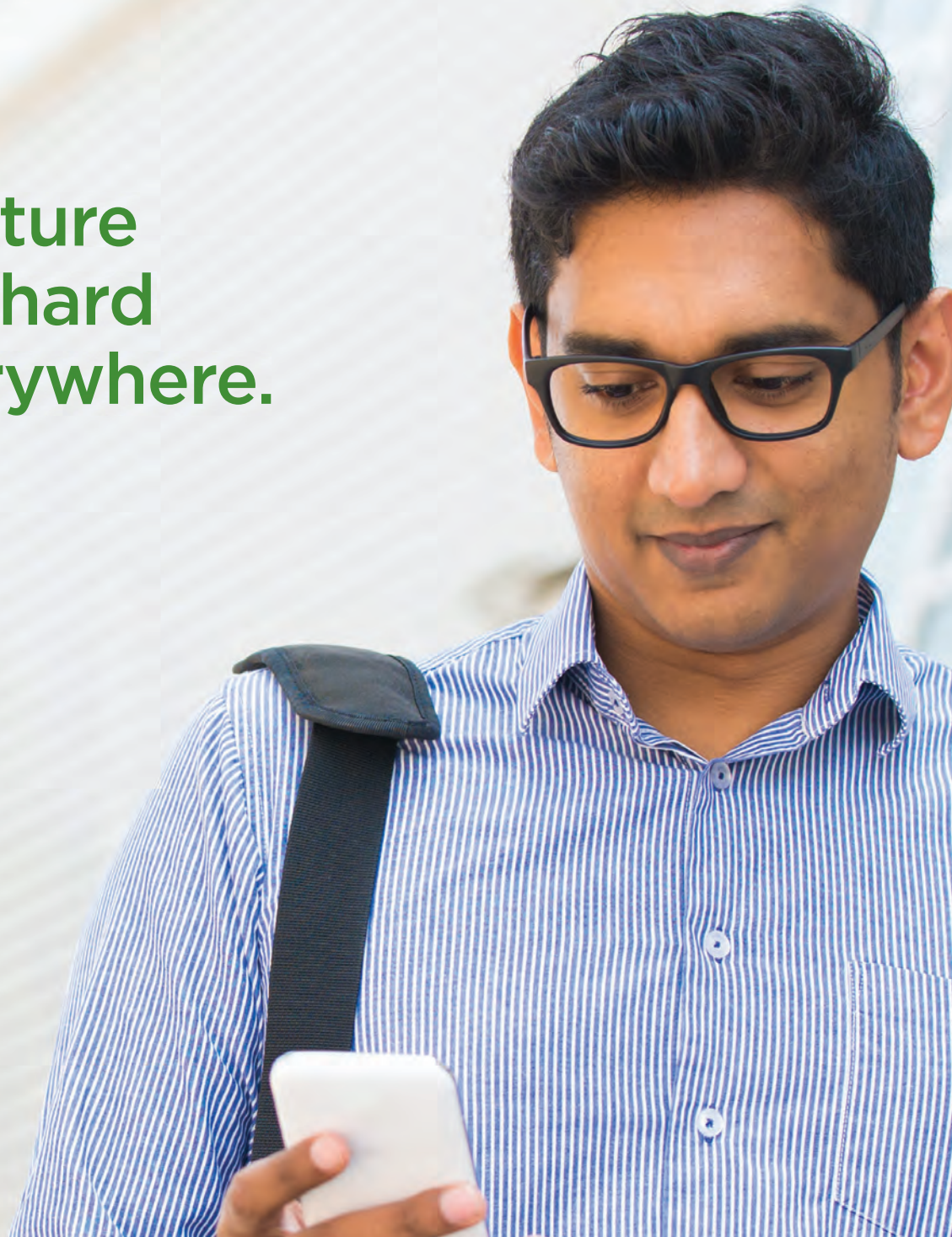


Paul Vella, Apprentice, Salix Homes

The apprenticeships are run in conjunction with the procurement

consortium Procure Plus and all trainees can work towards an NVQ in either horticulture or customer services as well as the security industry authority licence.

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Southern IT Forum meeting at Microsoft

The Southern IT Forum's June meeting was held at Microsoft's offices in London towards the end of last month.

The session started off with a presentation from Microsoft's public-sector cloud strategist, Jeremy Tolmie, who took the group through IT transformation trends and Microsoft's cloud services. He was followed by Steve Hughes, a Microsoft technology solutions specialist, who gave an insight into the deployment of Windows 10 (including IE11 migration), Windows Phone productivity and management, and mobility and universal application development. The morning session ended with a sneak preview of Microsoft's new Surface Hub for collaborative working.

After lunch, the group discussed a range of topics, from the deployment and embedding of Microsoft Dynamics CRM, deployment of Windows 10, learning environments, and software licensing costs.

The Forum is a well-established forum for senior IT managers who work in the housing sector in London and the South of England and it has around 100 members. For further information about the Southern IT Forum, please email Jonathan Creaser, RHP's head of ICT at jonathan.creaser@rhp.org.uk.



Omfax appoints new project manager

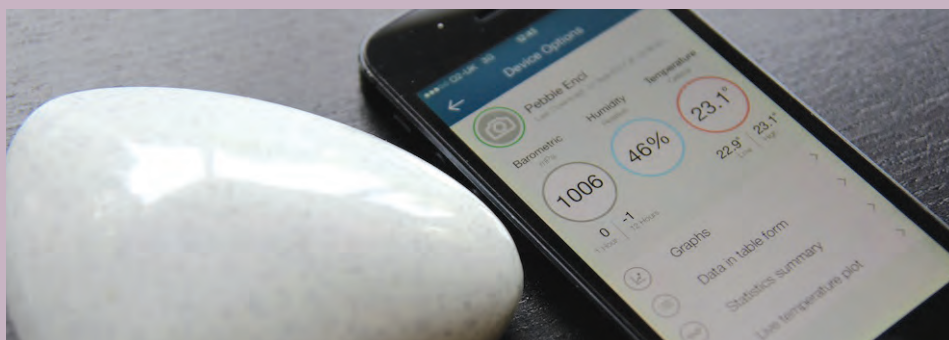
Omfax Systems has expanded its housing team with the appointment of Marjorie Matthews as its new project manager.

She joins the company from Capita where she was a pre-sales consultant

for seven years. She has also worked with a number of well-known housing management, mobile working, and repairs and maintenance software providers, including Orchard and Civica.

Matthews said, "Having worked at companies specifying Omfax's technology, I am delighted to be working with the team to deliver innovative solutions for customer services in housing."

INTERNET OF THINGS PILOT PROJECT BY THE CONNECTED HOME CONSORTIUM



The Connected Home Consortium is running a series of pilot projects to assess how the Internet of Things could help with tenancy and asset management applications. The first pilot focuses on sensor technology to help manage tenancy issues related to temperature, damp and condensation in housing providers' properties.

The consortium is using Blue Maestro's Tempo devices. These are small, lightweight temperature, humidity and pressure sensors which record environmental conditions every seven seconds. Readings from the devices

are collected by a smartphone running the Tempo app over Bluetooth Low Energy. The devices can be delivered by post and installed by tenants themselves without the involvement of a specialist. They are also so cheap that they are effectively 'disposable', especially when compared with the cost of the usual equipment needed to monitor temperature and moisture measurements.

Matt Leach, chief executive of HACT, the agency behind the Connected Home Consortium, said, "These pilots are just the first step towards a vision of 'big

data' and automation achieved through connected housing. Our pilot projects aim to get new technology out 'into the wild' and involved in a range of tenancy and asset management applications.

"Housing providers are imagining a connected world where we know the thermal performance of all of our housing stock and we can use this data to create benchmarks and then predict units with potential damp and condensation issues. But it goes further than just stock condition; if we know the average temperature of flats in a block then we can use machines to easily spot when a flat is under heated, which is perhaps an indication of where there may be a fuel poverty problem."

The consortium comprises EMH Homes, Family Mosaic, First Wessex, Halton Housing Trust, MHS Homes, Northwards Housing, Radian Group, Spectrum Housing, Wandle Housing and Watford Community Housing Trust.

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