

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

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PUBLISHER'S NOTES



GEORGE GRANT
Publisher
Housing Technology

Now we are 50

If you didn't notice from this edition's cover, this is the 50th edition of Housing Technology.

While we still remain a prime candidate for the BBC's Have I Got News For You 'guest publication' slot, so much has happened in our sector since 2008.

In Housing Technology's infancy, it was apparent to us (and to most of our

readers, no doubt) that the housing sector definitely lagged behind the commercial sector in terms of technology adoption and innovation. Mobile working was a relative rarity, web-based applications almost non-existent and legacy systems were mired in out-dated IT infrastructures.

Fast-forward to today, and housing providers are leading the way in pioneering 'to scale' internet of things (IoT) programmes unseen in the commercial sector, cloud-based applications and mobile working are the norm, and, most importantly, technology is now typically seen as the single most important factor in driving housing providers' business strategies.

Housing providers' IT departments have completely transformed themselves in the past decade or so, from being reactive 'utility' services to becoming proactive, value-adding enablers of fundamental changes in how housing providers run their internal operations and external services for tenants.

Get your copy of Digital by Default 2016

If you haven't already done so, you can now download your copy of our new 'Digital by Default 2016' report from www.housing-technology.com.

Published in conjunction with Go ON UK and kindly sponsored by Aareon, Advanced Business Solutions, BT, Halton Housing, Longhurst Group, Orchard Information Systems, Origin Housing, RHP and Sentinel Housing, Housing Technology's 'Digital by Default 2016' report is the first significant technology report on digital inclusion (DI) in the UK social housing sector since our original 2012 report (published in conjunction with RaceOnline 2012).

The report gives guidance on how to digitally include more of your tenants; not only to improve their lives but also to improve your own business performance. The report:

- Shows the results of a very comprehensive online survey (highlights below) of housing providers and their views on DI and their strategies to support it;
- Covers how leading housing providers have successfully adopted DI into their overall business strategies; and;
- Provides guidance for best practice around DI strategies in housing.



Order your copy of the Digital by Default 2016 report from www.housing-technology.com.

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KYPERA WINS COMMUNITY GATEWAY FOR SERVICE DELIVERY



Community Gateway Association has bought Kypera Hometeam as its housing management system for its staff and 6,100 tenants. The first phase of the implementation is scheduled to go live in July 2016.

Based on the latest Microsoft .Net technology, Hometeam will enable the housing provider's staff to access tenant information including tenancy details, rents and property data in one place allowing staff to better record, manage and track tenant communications. The solution also includes an online portal for tenants to access services and communicate with Community Gateway.

ANTIVIA & MUSGRAVE ANALYTICS PERFORM WITH TOGETHER HOUSING

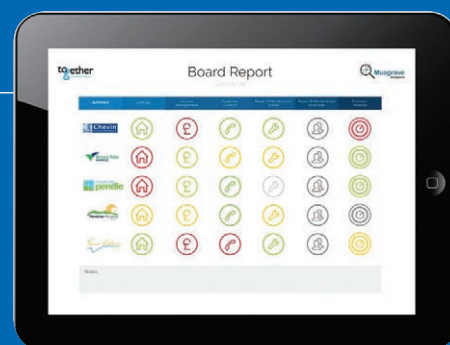
Antivia, a business intelligence software provider, and Musgrave Analytics, a boutique analytics firm, have been working with Together Housing Group to develop a performance management framework.

The framework provides an easy way for all staff at Together Housing Group to get a consistent view of the numbers that drive their success. These numbers include return on capital employed, repair and maintenance costs, average re-let days and projected annual turnover.

Mark Dunford, executive group director of resources, Together Housing Group, said, "The framework that Musgrave Analytics helped us develop and the

dashboards created with Antivia's DecisionPoint give clarity to staff as to what we mean by 'delivering high performance', one of our key values."

As experts at collecting, analysing and interpreting data, Musgrave Analytics created the framework that enables Together Housing to drive productivity and efficiency gains. Antivia's DecisionPoint software, which enables non-technical people to create sophisticated, interactive business dashboards, was then used to visualise the data from Musgrave Analytics in a format that everyone at Together Housing could understand and easily work with.



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AN ERP BY ANY OTHER NAME

Aidan Dunphy, Head of Product Strategy, Orchard

Back in the day, there was a council or housing provider coming to market every week looking for an 'integrated housing management system'. Whether migrating from an in-house IT nightmare or wanting to swap out another HMS, the transaction was predictable; a beauty parade comparing back-office functionality across 20 or so modules, each designed to cater for siloed departments.

It's still the case that the majority of housing providers depend heavily on housing systems to support their business on a daily basis. Moreover, the new business market remains buoyant, although specifications continue to become more demanding, growing in both detail and specificity. It's arguable that this is a doomed attempt to fix a fundamentally flawed procurement process: you could liken it to an overblown waterfall project, in which the customer spends months trying to stop the world long enough to specify in advance and in detail everything they will need for the next decade. They then give suppliers a fortnight to design and commit to a solution with fixed scope, timescale and resources. We all know what happens when you try to do that.

However, the sector is in transformation and its needs from ICT are changing faster than ever. You expect a generic customer-centred platform which supports your evolving business model. You need a ready solution but also the flexibility to customise and create your own processes and user interface. You want access to all of this from any device anywhere and at any time without needing thin-client technology, a focus on digital UX and UI for staff, partners and customers. Open integration capability should be a given, as should the freedom to make your own choice of BI and analytics solutions.

In fact, you shouldn't really think about a 'housing management system' anymore; a 'business management software solution for housing companies' might be

more apt. So how can you get this? There are three approaches:

Option 1: Engage the sector specialists

The chief advantage of going with specialists is that they live and breathe housing. Their lifeblood depends on keeping up with changes in the legal and political landscape, and building solutions to address challenges such as welfare reform, right-to-buy and pay-to-stay.

However, not all suppliers are the same. Their differing attitudes can be illustrated using the Boston Matrix; some regard their HMS as a 'cash cow', exploiting customer lock-in resulting from the high cost of change to generate recurring revenues but with little product investment. These products haven't changed much, are outdated and unfairly give other suppliers to the sector a bad name; the 'star' products of the past certainly need renewal.

The needs of the sector are changing quickly and there is a new breed of products coming onto the market which could perhaps be described as 'question marks' and are not yet proven. You could put these into three categories: evolving from solid foundations, tear it up and start again, or buying lots of components and promising to bolt them together (also known as growth by acquisition).

You could put these into three categories: evolving from solid foundations, tear it up and start again, or buying lots of components and promising to bolt them together (also known as growth by acquisition).

There are many examples of housing providers successfully using integrated housing solutions that incorporate functionality for CRM, case management, mobile, etc. However, there will always be specialist solutions that can't be

matched like-for-like by a housing solution vendor; vendors should offer choice to their customers to use their own integrated solutions, take a 'best of breed' partner product with an assurance of integrated support, or an API which will enable the provider to integrate a product of their own choosing.

For example, if you want to go down the Microsoft Dynamics route, then you should find out if your housing solution fully supports this. Providers don't all share the same priorities and therefore choice is crucial; you don't want to be locked into a closed ecosystem and forced to use add-on modules.

Option 2: Build it yourself

A number of providers are busy building their own housing solutions, having given up on the 'traditional vendors'. These are at different stages of completeness but one thing they all share is that in effect they're a bespoke development for one client. At first, this is a wonderful experience – you get exactly what you want, and quickly! But as with all software solutions, mistakes creep in and your needs change; inexorably support issues mount up and it becomes harder and harder to move forward. One needs only to consider the fate of the high-profile in-house development projects of the previous decade to see how expensive this can become.

A dispassionate value for money analysis would judge some packaged solutions favourably compared with the cost of in-house development or adapting products designed for the commercial sector. As Brian Moran of Adactus Housing quipped after his characteristically breath-taking presentation about analytics, cloud and IoT at Housing Technology's 2015 conference, "In defence of housing management systems... they are very cheap; what we do [in-house development] is very expensive."

Option 3: ERP

The notion of a 'housing management system' is now only part of the overall

AN ERP BY ANY OTHER NAME

Continued from previous page

capability of the leading sector-specific solutions. Suppliers investing in the future are looking to provide similar capability and integration as the traditional ERP vendors, but for a fraction of the cost. The sector specialists should be able to provide not just support for housing management but also operations, asset management, finance, HR, payroll, CRM and, increasingly, commercial activities. The solution should be integrated at data, process and analytical levels and mobilised to enable business agility and freedom of technology choices.

ERP solutions can also offer these capabilities, albeit at a much higher price; some hope to benefit from

developments funded by large corporates in commercial sectors, but others would argue that the development required to meet the specific needs that define the housing sector will never be commercially attractive to these vendors. If you're happy to be led by the commercial imperatives and working practices of other sectors then this could be your choice.

A long-term commitment

It isn't easy to change the ICT platform on which your business depends. Rather than seeing the answer as simply buying or building a solution you should also be asking hard questions about what life will be like in the future. How will you keep

your solution up-to-date? What happens when today's popular choice technology starts to become unbearably expensive? Can you move to cloud-based solutions? Do your key suppliers 'get' the sector and how it's changing, and will they commit to it for years to come?

If you choose to go into a relationship with a supplier, remember it's how they think and what they're planning that matters, not what they can sell you on paper or in a demo.

Aidan Dunphy is head of product strategy at Orchard.

KING STREET HOUSING DEPLOYS FILEHOUND DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

In a bid for reduce the amount of paper passing through its office and increase performance and efficiency, King Street Housing Society has implemented an electronic document management system from FileHound.



FileHound was chosen because it was affordable and, being browser-based, didn't require additional expenditure on remote-access technologies.

Craig Glasper, chief executive officer, King Street Housing Society, said, "Core to us providing a better service to our tenants is the centralisation of all documents and associated information regarding

properties and tenancies. FileHound allows us to achieve this with additional workflows, automation and integration with our

housing management system to provide a central repository for information."

King Street Housing integrated FileHound with its Omniledger Pyramid housing management and accounts system to allow all tenancy and property records to be accessible from one screen. Data look-ups and validations ensure that all documents link to the correct property or tenancy, and users can call up any document or information instantly.

King Street Housing is now implementing workflows and authorisation processes for accounts and other aspects of housing management.



Castle Computer Services launches dedicated housing division

Castle Computer Services has created a dedicated housing solutions division for its business and appointed Paul Sutherland as its director of housing solutions.

Well-known as a leading provider of SunSystems finance software and Qlikview business intelligence solutions to housing providers, the new division makes available a full portfolio of best-of-breed software and infrastructure solutions which have been carefully selected to meet the specific requirements of housing providers.

George Strathie, group software and services director, Castle Computer Services, said, "We have a strong reputation in the

housing sector and the launch of our housing solutions division means we can offer a highly focused, end-to-end service to housing providers, delivered by consultants who have specialist knowledge of implementing IT services in this sector."

Paul Sutherland, Castle's newly appointed director of housing solutions, has worked with over 200 housing providers over the course of his career, including housing-based HR and payroll solutions for six years before joining Castle where he worked with software vendors such as Infor, Qlikview, Cintra and Civica.



DIGITAL – IT'S ALL ABOUT DATA

Richard Holland, Head of Business Solutions, Genesis Housing Association

As I write this article, I am reminded of Bill Clinton's election speech for the 1992 US presidential election, "It's about the economy, stupid", which during his campaign, Clinton's strategist, James Carville, posted this slogan on his office door as a way of motivating staff and politicians to stick to one of the key messages, the economy. A national newspaper picked up the slogan and suddenly the simple statement started to resonate with the US people. Hence, the speech and slogan to reinforce the need to fix the economy. This was a particularly important moment and timing is everything. The year before, George Bush had been significantly ahead in polls. A dramatic turn-around to Clinton's favour ensued, partly as a result of the tag "it's about the economy, stupid".

Digital is a little like Clinton's simple and effective campaign, which is captivating imaginations to get behind a better way of providing services to tenants as well as changing from traditional approaches to electronic and data-driven transactions.

So, what is digital about? Of course, in IT we translate things slightly differently and we focus on the detail; for example, we know the following:

- **The 'why?'** – It's about a new approach, to do things more efficiently and flexibly, create cost reductions and move housing providers into a modern digital world. Above all, it's about the tenants, improving the service and providing choice.
- **The 'what?'** – It's about digital, right? So it must be about IT systems.
- **The 'how?'** – What about the how?

The 'how?' is a big question. We have IT systems and we know some of them need to be better and are disconnected from each other with disparate and often sparse data sets. We need to create near real-time transactions for our tenants

to enable digital, meaning we need to integrate them together. We also have a massive amount of intelligence inside housing providers and in the world at large, with some of it good data and some of it bad data. We also have the new emergence of the internet of things and smart devices which could provide truly cutting-edge service from smart homes right across to care services. The one thing which links them all is data.

Data is key and learning how best to use it (in all forms) through people, processes and systems will support digitally-focused services. In fact, as we approach a competitive world, the winners are the ones who can use data to their advantage. The debate regarding ERP systems and single sources of the truth has moved on. It's not about the mega monolithic system which forces organisations down a strict process-driven exercise based on a manufacturing-style six sigma approach. This has created inflexibility and eventually stifles growth or even worse.

There are many examples in recent history where organisations (some of whom are no longer in business) were unable to recognise what was happening in a changing world because they focused too much on processes and cost efficiency. They didn't understand what the market was telling them and they didn't understand what customers really wanted. In other words, they didn't understand the data. A bit like the US election in 1992, Bush missed the main point that was affecting people (jobs and the economy) and was perceived to be not listening. As a result, he lost the election. He didn't understand the data.

A digital world means more change. It means we need to provide services quickly and interpret the information in real time to make quick decisions. It also

means that today's exciting technology is tomorrow's washed-up mobile phone or ex-US president.

So, what is important for digital? Data, information, people and processes. Knowing and understanding our customers (listening to them) and potential customers means we need data from any source in the world in real time. Knowing and understanding how we provide services, whether these are smart services or not, means we need data and to learn how to transact them in real time.

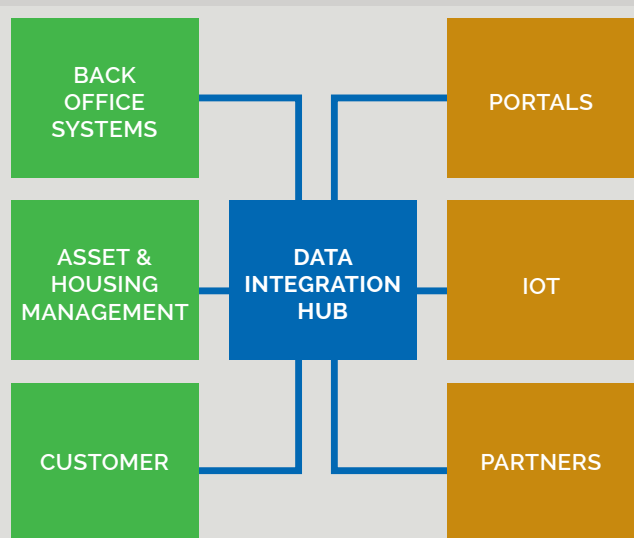
The following pillars are necessary for a digital future:

- **Real-time messaging:** systems need to be linked at the data level across multiple services for real-time transactions. Some systems will become disconnected across cloud services as we move to hybrid in-house and cloud-based IT services.
- **Data quality:** data needs to be of high quality for improved customer intelligence and automatic transactions. Data-cleansing rules which focus attention on simple processes and transactions enable real-time decisions about the data, either to correct a process at the front end or for batch updates at the back end.
- **Information security:** data in systems about our customers and services needs to be protected and secured.
- **Intelligence:** we need to understand our customers and our future customers across all of our data, including big data in the world at large. Business intelligence, predictive analytics and even artificial intelligence are all possibilities and are important.

A simple digital approach therefore focuses on the data, with a central hub managing information across the estate for real-time transactions with plug-in

DIGITAL - IT'S ALL ABOUT DATA

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components in a secure and intelligent way. The figure above shows a simplified view.

The system architecture has internal systems, with data and processes for the supporting services (in green) and external systems supporting portals, smart things (IoT) and partners (in orange).

Data is cleansed and passed through the centralised hub with near real-time

transactions for systems holding tenant, housing, asset and back-office data across the estate. The information is secured through hybrid cloud offerings providing services which monitor threat events.

Business Intelligence, predictive analytics and artificial intelligence are possible by allowing systems to connect to information across the world. This will introduce in-memory processing to provide real-time intelligence on

data. There are already systems being created with this in mind, mainly to allow smart devices to run BI rule sets for instant decisions or even a smart digital 'friend' using information to provide the preferred option for social housing services.

The systems at the data level can be plugged in allowing for the easy implementation of any smart thing. This

is our starting point for enabling a plug-and-play, IoT digital future. We can plug them in and when today's technologies become defunct, well, we can unplug them and plug in the next new smart things.

To return to the 1992 US election campaign, I can't help thinking what would happen now if Clinton and Bush went head to head today? I doubt the result would change, but how would they understand and interpret the information on the US electorate. Probably through a smartphone with an automatic text message generated from real-time BI delivered from a recent poll. It's all about the data (and probably always has been) and the winners, like Clinton's election campaign, are the ones who know how to use it and understand what customers really want, before anyone else.

Richard Holland is head of business solutions at Genesis Housing Association.

This is the personal view of Richard Holland and it does not necessarily represent the view of Genesis Housing Association.

Cadcorp launches hosted mapping service for housing

Cadcorp has reported that many smaller housing providers are missing out on the benefits of using geographic information to help manage their housing stock because they are unable to justify the cost of employing a dedicated mapping expert. As a result, Cadcorp has launched a hosted, web-based GIS and mapping service designed specifically for housing providers with fewer than 10,000 properties.

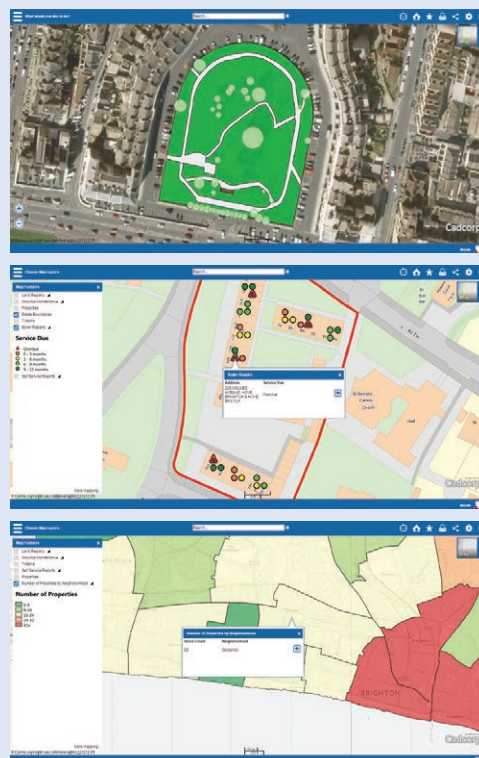
The service includes internet access to Cadcorp's Web Map Layers, an off-the-shelf application for presenting and interrogating spatial data. The software is hosted on Microsoft's Azure cloud platform and Emapsite supplies mapping data sourced from the Ordnance Survey, including both detailed licenced data and open data.

Martin McGarry, managing director, Cadcorp, said, "With this new service,

the responsibility for managing both map data and web mapping software sits with Cadcorp. The housing provider can simply subscribe to a package that includes software, data and management services."

Cadcorp will help housing providers set up and configure the service, and will manage all software and data updates on their behalf for the duration of a project. The company will also help them manage their own in-house business data visualised via web mapping; typically this will include static data, such as details about assets, and dynamic data, such as voids, arrears and repairs.

McGarry said, "For smaller housing providers, our hosted web mapping service can be cheaper, faster, and more cost-effective than an in-house alternative."





FIVE STEPS TO DELIVERING DIGITAL SERVICES IN HOUSING

Jeff Hewitt, Executive Director, Housing & Asset Management, Civica

The government has set out its ambition to reduce the number of people who are offline by 25 per cent this year and a further 25 per cent each year for the following two years. In addition, it is aiming for 80 per cent of universal credit applications to be made online by 2017. The drive to get more people online and using digital public services was a key topic of discussion at the recent Civica Expo, with a series of panel discussions on the need to deliver a new and personalised experience for tenants, improve efficiencies and enhance the quality of services to meet the demands of the digital age.

The general conclusion was that the move towards a 'digital first' culture in housing is beginning to see progress, as the technology to do so is there; but implementation and adoption rates still vary dramatically between different housing providers.

While many housing providers now have online rent portals, usage is low and they are often seen as an information site rather than anything else. During a panel discussion on the future of technology in housing, it was noted that a large number of tenants still visited their housing provider's offices for face-to-face communication, and with online tenant portals having usage rates as low as 5 per cent.

Meanwhile, many front-end housing websites are moving to a self-service model where tenants can access their rent statements, report the need for repairs and log other issues. However, in some cases, the back office has yet to fully integrate with the front end so there is still a manual element meaning that the impact on business efficiency is not yet being felt.

Advances in technology and automation, the proliferation of devices and communication channels, and the greater availability of data for a 24/7 on-demand public is changing everything for all of us.

It's clear there is still work to be done to ensure that digital services are being used to their full potential and to get communities up to speed with the benefits that digital services provide. Some

housing providers have even said that they aim to eradicate letters altogether within the next three years, which certainly sounds ambitious. But what are the steps that housing providers need to take to embrace the digital revolution?

1. Understand your community

Housing providers are having to cater to an increasingly diverse audience, from the digitally-native Generation Z (born 1995-2012) who will soon start becoming Tenant Z, to the UK's growing elderly population, some of whom have never accessed the internet before. First and foremost, housing providers must understand what generational and digital mix their community comprises so they can tailor services appropriately.

2. Be inclusive

Once the needs of the community have been established, then housing providers can set about closing the gaps, either by developing and launching new services tailored to suit specific demographical needs, such as a telephone translation service for tenants who don't speak English or working towards digital inclusion. As digital services are considerably more efficient and cost-effective to run, it's usually preferable for organisations to find ways of removing barriers to internet use among the digitally illiterate and develop online services that are safe and easy to use. One housing provider at the Civica Expo explained how it had conducted a digital inclusion survey in its local area to find out how many people were using digital services and what the appetite was like in the area for online training. Training was then provided to people in their community who showed a desire to learn how to use the internet and digital services. Findings from their digital inclusion survey also showed that more people were using smartphones and tablets to access digital services, rather than laptops and PCs. This led the organisation to adapt their training methods to reflect this trend.

3. Effective marketing and communication

While having the right technology is crucial, effective marketing and

communication to let your community know you've invested in new digital channels or services is important if they are actually going to be used. Last autumn, Sentinel Housing launched its UK online centre with an event, social media and blog activity. Meanwhile Hounslow Council recently launched a new 'find my nearest' online tool to help people locate their nearest schools, libraries, leisure centres and police stations. They raised awareness of the service with PR, banners on their homepage and within their e-newsletter. Without this kind of supporting activity, housing providers will inevitably find that they have invested considerable money in cutting-edge technology but the uptake of services will be low.

4. Strong leadership

For any effective change to take hold, it requires leaders to drive change forward and win the hearts and minds of staff. Our 'Invigorating the Public Sector Revolution' report looks at organisational leaders and how they can empower the wider workforce to create a structure that drives transformation.

5. Back-office technology to manage front-line services

Front-line staff should be encouraged to spend as much time as possible in the community, listening to people's concerns and encouraging them to use digital services. Mobile and back-office technology is increasingly helping front-line staff manage their caseloads on the go, while staying connected and keeping up with developments in the office, particularly those which offer integrated CRM and communication capabilities and can flex to capitalise rapidly on new technology.

With the cost of digital decreasing for both consumers and organisations, and user demand for instant and efficient services and continued cost-savings by central government increasing, the case for embracing and encouraging digital services in the housing sector is increasingly robust. Now is the time to invest or else risk being left behind.

Jeff Hewitt is executive director for housing and asset management at Civica.

A man with a beard and balding head, wearing a brown suit, white shirt, and striped tie, is looking out a window. His hands are clasped in front of him, and he is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The background is a blurred view of a city from a high-rise building.

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Advanced ConsultCRM – Using CRM to tackle arrears

Housing providers should be making better and more intelligent use of technology to tackle their arrears following welfare reform, according to Advanced ConsultCRM. This follows a recent study which found that 90 per cent of tenants receiving universal credit are in arrears, three times higher than the sector's average for arrears.

Advanced said that access to more accurate tenant data is more important than ever; without this data, housing providers will find it more difficult to spot trends and identify tenants that may need additional support to ensure punctual payments. However, more than a third of tenant data held by housing providers is often inaccurate or missing, with 0.5 per cent of named tenants actually deceased.

Gaps in tenant data are frequently because most housing providers have disparate applications that may have different parameters about what constitutes being in arrears, e.g. one day late or 10 days late. In addition, housing



management systems typically focus on the property's inventory and rent, rather than the tenant, meaning valuable data isn't being recorded.

Advanced said that robust CRM systems can enable housing providers to capture information about tenants and their circumstances in one place, allowing them to more easily identify trends in payment activity and spot early signs of late or non-payment. This enables them to intervene earlier with advice services.



ASSET MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE – BALANCING OPERATIONAL AND STRATEGIC DEMANDS

John Buckland, Director, In4systems

The time when asset management systems could get away with only maintaining and reporting on accurate component, servicing and regulatory data is over. These days, housing providers need systems that incorporate active asset management, asset and liability registers, workflow, GIS, mobile working and comprehensive integration with housing, finance, CRM, EDM, direct works and other systems.

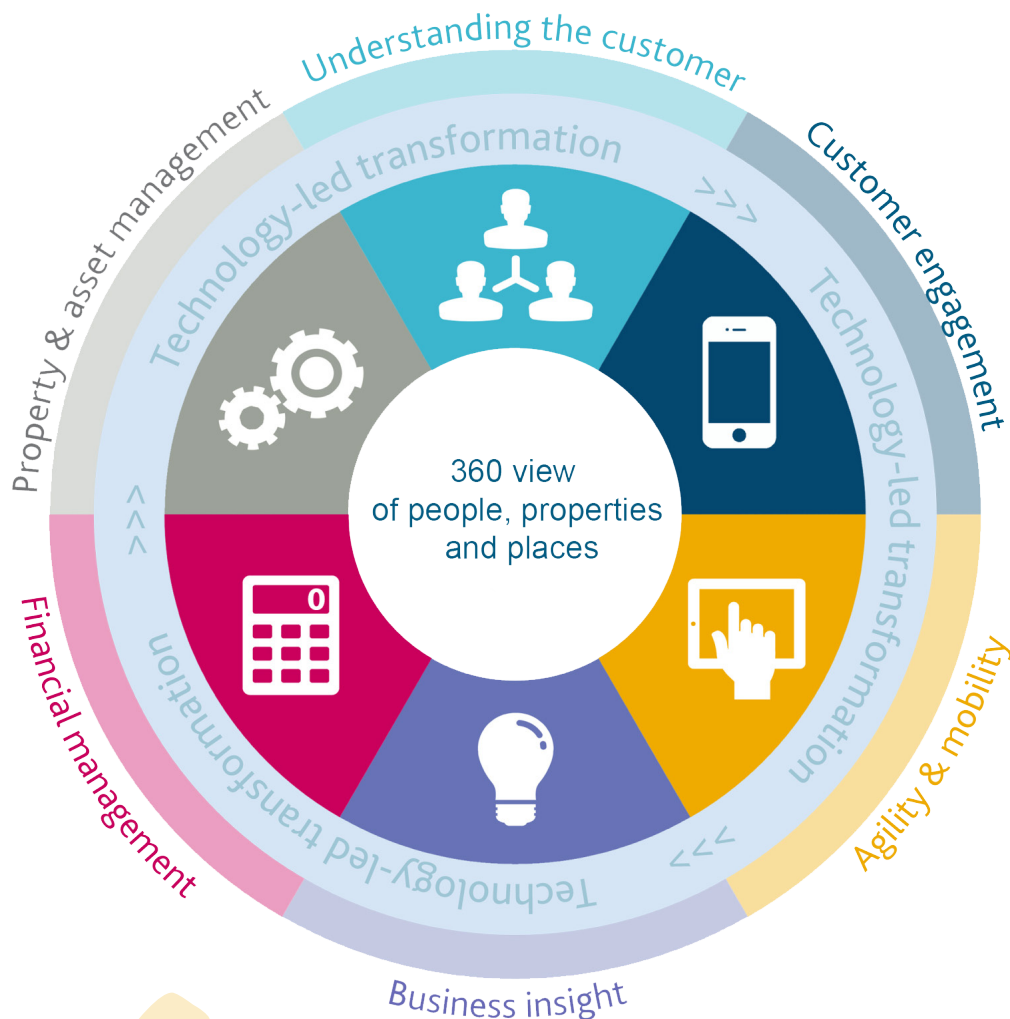
Let's start with a few questions:

- If you ran a 30-year investment plan from your asset management system, would it fit with your organisation's business plan?
- Can you appraise alternative future treatment scenarios for any selection of properties based on both net present value (NPV) and a points-scoring model?
- If so, does this have the flexibility to respond to current issues such as rent reductions and to stress-test business plan assumptions with alternative discount rate and inflation assumptions?
- Can all relevant asset management information (planned component replacements, warranties, service dates, planned projects, asbestos and other risks) be viewed where they are needed in your housing, CRM or direct works systems?
- Does your asset management system deliver jobs directly to your direct works system for appliance servicing and planned maintenance projects and update itself from those systems with appointments, no-access records and completions?
- Can you set up and regularly change data collection templates with comprehensive data validation rules and know that your mobile working system will pick up and apply these automatically?
- Can your asbestos register be interrogated (with an audit trail) by anyone with an internet-enabled device and a valid password?

I could go on, but these are all examples of the ways in which systems have had to adapt to anticipate and meet housing providers' aspirations in the last few years.

Continued on page 12

Your complete housing management software solution



‘Being live on OPENHousing is great. We’re already seeing the benefits of having our housing management functionality joined up on one, feature rich platform.

We’re really confident about how the software will support us, both now and into the future.’

Emma Blatchford, Head of Resources, Cornwall Housing Ltd

ASSET MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE – BALANCING OPERATIONAL AND STRATEGIC DEMANDS

Continued from page 10

Those who are reviewing their use of asset management software can now choose from three types: independent specialist suppliers' systems; integrated modules within a housing management system; and systems from suppliers who offer separate but integrated specialist systems for housing and asset management.

All of these have their pros and cons but, in my view, a successful IT supplier has to both recognise the depth of functionality required and have the specialist knowledge of the asset management practitioner in order to be able to adapt to deliver changing requirements. Historically, IT suppliers have been less successful in this area because they have underestimated the scope of the requirements and have not had the market expertise. It's for this reason that several previously independent systems have been acquired by housing systems vendors. This has brought together subject experts from both sides and has resulted in more product innovation. Improved integration capability has flowed from this, and not just with products from the same vendor.

So let's have a look at a few of the many market-driven changes of the past few years:

Asset and liability registers

Last year, the HCA introduced the requirement for asset and liability registers to be maintained, identifying all items affecting individual properties. For this, data items such as valuations, charges, easements, repairing obligations, rent and many more need to be stored and reported on. Asset management systems are now playing their part by providing the means of loading, storing and reporting on this data.

Active asset management

As we all know, the financial worth of a housing provider lies principally in its properties. Encouraged by consultants who were able to bring commercial experience to a sector whose focus was on customer service delivery, asset managers began to use spreadsheet-based tools to analyse stock viability and to highlight poorly performing stock. This was mainly done in two ways: the first was through NPV calculations

which required the entry of all projected income and expenditure at a property level over, say, 30 years; and the second was by assigning point scores based on shared property characteristics. These spreadsheet models are often supplied by consultants and their involvement is often needed whenever the data has to be refreshed (at least annually).

It made sense to build this functionality into asset management systems because they have the property and planned maintenance records in them already. Options appraisals of this kind can now be created for any subset of properties and, in addition to establishing good or poor performance, systems can now evaluate alternative future treatment options such as disposal, conversion to market rent and demolition/rebuild. Systems have user-defined assumptions for inflation for each cost and income type and for the discount rate used in the NPV calculations.

Of course, the asset and liability register data is useful in options appraisals which can also be used to stress-test business plan assumptions, such as what happens when rent decreases by one per cent per annum.

Compliance

Having robust mechanisms to deliver compliance has been a key requirement of asset management systems for years. Systems have been able to not only integrate with direct works and third-party contractors but also to drive and manage the no-access escalation processes.

The difference now is the need for a joined-up, workflow-based process. For example, the requirement for a fixed interval fire-risk inspection can be set up and this will trigger a surveyor to undertake the FRA inspection using a template, complete with automatic risk scoring, designed within the system and with data collection using mobile working. If the completed inspection then results in any requirement for action, the workflow will initiate that action and, when it is complete, update the collected data to reflect the adjustment of the relevant risks.

The recently-announced future change in the gas regulations will require systems to prevent any early servicing of boilers causing the 'next service due' date to be reset, and is an example of how systems have to respond quickly to regulatory change.

Workforce mobilisation

Asset management systems have always had a mobile data collection capability. I remember doing stock condition surveys 25 years ago using a Psion device about the size and shape of a brick. As you would expect, these have moved with the times and can now run on any iOS/Android/Windows device and provide easy data entry and full validation and integration with their host systems.

These days, there are also a number of form-based generic mobile working applications which offer huge flexibility but which have no native integration with the systems into which the data has to flow. The choice is, therefore, to standardise on a mobile working system and have to deal with the integration and data validation issues, not to mention the inability to cope easily with changes in the survey design in the host system, or to accept that you may need to have two apps running on the same device.

Other changes

Here is a by no means definitive list of some additional market-driven changes that have been made recently or will need to be provided by IT suppliers:

- Better IT systems integration (e.g. integrating servicing and planned works jobs with direct works systems);
- Facilitating enterprise-wide reporting;
- Accommodating housing providers' commercial aspirations;
- GIS integration;
- Internet of Things.

To conclude, I would say this: asset management systems should be as strategic and high profile in an organisation as its housing systems and, if they are not as well integrated as you would like, make the effort to get the parties together and make it happen. You will find a willingness there as it's in everyone's interest.

John Buckland is a director at In4systems.

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ASRA HOUSING CUTS ARREARS WITH MOBYSOFT'S RENTSENSE

Asra Housing Group has been using Mobysoft's RentSense software to reduce its rent arrears from six per cent in 2012 to just under four per cent by March 2015, representing around £1.65 million.

In 2012, Asra Housing was using its housing management system to manage arrears, but was experiencing several issues. Simon Cousins, income manager, Asra Housing Group, said, "Income officers had too many weekly tasks. This was compounded by the fact that officers were spending lots of time managing their escalation processes rather than the arrears and deleting a large number of actions. This meant that a large number of accounts were not getting looked at regularly."

There were also problems with the data from Asra Housing's systems because its management team was unable to get a clear insight into performance. Emma Conlon, head of income, Asra Housing Group, said, "We needed to improve income performance because our arrears were at six per cent but we couldn't analyse the data coming our way."

In late 2012, Asra Housing reviewed its arrears performance, systems and processes. The review's findings recommended that systems and processes needed to change if it was going to meet its incremental arrears targets of 4.4 per cent for 2014, four per cent for 2015 and 3.8 per cent for 2016. The findings also recommended using Mobysoft's RentSense software which was then implemented in March 2013. After one year, arrears had fallen from six per cent to 4.4 per cent, and by March 2015 they had reached 3.8 per cent,

ahead of the housing provider's four per cent target for the year, and is now at just 3.6 per cent.

Conlon said, "There was a bedding-in period, but within six months we were seeing dramatic results. Since we started using RentSense and changed our processes, our arrears have fallen by around £1.65m."

While Asra Housing's main focus was on reducing its arrears, it has also found that use of RentSense has helped its income team get through their weekly caseload and created spare capacity within the team.

Conlon said, "We originally focused on arrears, not creating income officer capacity, but we are now increasing the officers' patch size by about 400 which has allowed us to reduce our FTE."

Hexagon Housing predicts arrears with Mobysoft

Hexagon Housing Association has bought Mobysoft's predictive technology to help mitigate the effects of on-going welfare reforms.

Tom Harding, housing services manager, Hexagon Housing Association, said, "It has become much harder to maintain our performance; over the past few years, the nationwide economy has meant more tenants are finding it harder to prioritise their rent payments.

"A variety of policies have made it more challenging. More tenants now receive partial Housing Benefit and the bedroom tax has also made some people liable for rent payments for the first time."



Commenting on the impact of the annual one per cent rent reductions that most housing providers now face and the consequent drive for cost-savings, Harding said, "The drive for efficiency meant staff were being expected to do more. We were increasingly finding that our methods of arrears control were not keeping up with all these changes. This meant we had to look for new ways to reduce arrears, and that is why we chose Mobysoft."

Hexagon Housing is now using Mobysoft's RentSense software which uses a series of complex algorithms to profile tenants and then accurately predict behavioural patterns relating to rent payments and arrears.

Harding said, "While RentSense is clearly a very technical and complex product, the result for end-users is very straightforward. It gives officers a clear list of cases that need attention, in priority groups. It also makes it easier for our senior staff to monitor performance and allocate resources where they are needed most."

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Trace Solutions & One Housing develop service-charge software

In partnership with One Housing, Trace Solutions has developed a new software package to help housing providers to manage service charges and rental calculations across complex portfolios of rented, owned and part-owned properties.

The software is based on Trace's off-the-shelf property management package which is widely used in the private sector to provide a complete end-to-end solution, unifying service charges, rents and accounts ledgers.

The new software was developed by Trace in partnership with One Housing to provide a solution for handling the service

Matthew Saye,
Director of Citystyle &
Housing Operations,
One Housing



charges and rental calculations of over 15,000 homes. Working with One Housing, Trace undertook an analysis of the business requirements to ascertain what the software needed to deliver.

The needs identified ranged from terminology and the writing of new standard letters to residents, to legal

conformity with the Housing Act, and tenants' eligibility or otherwise for benefits. Full rental calculations were added to the package to complete it.

Matthew Saye, director of Citystyle and housing operations, One Housing, said, "With this new software, our reliance on spreadsheets has been vastly reduced, which has freed up resources and minimised the risk of human error. The software allows us to focus on expansion without concern for consistency of systems and compliance with best practice. It provides real-time reporting based on data that is always up-to-date."

MOBILE WORKING

1ST TOUCH MOBILISES THENUE HOUSING

Thenue Housing Association has introduced mobile workforce technology from 1st Touch in order to deliver more services digitally through its mobile operatives. These will initially include estate management and tenancy services along with pre- and post-void inspections.



1st Touch was chosen because of its software's ability to integrate with Thenue Housing's Aareon housing management systems as well as its 'smart airtime' facility which enables Thenue Housing's mobile workers to send data back to the office in compressed and encrypted bursts, whenever a signal is available.

Brian Gannon, head of housing, Thenue Housing Association, said, "We see our digital strategy as a very sound investment and 1st Touch is an

important element of this. Not only will its deployment boost customer service, it will also deliver significant efficiencies for the business.

"We looked at a number of solutions but 1st Touch won through. With 1st Touch, we can now have real-time data going straight from the mobile device into Aareon – that is a real step forward. In addition, the system's 'smart airtime' feature will ensure that communicating that data is easy because the system doesn't need a constant signal."

INTERNETALIA TRANSFORMS HYDE'S MAINTENANCE SERVICES

The Hyde Group is using InterNETalia's AccuServ solution for the delivery of responsive repairs and planned maintenance of its 12,000 homes.

AccuServ will deliver an agile, flexible service to tenants, with work ranging from kitchen and bathroom adaptations for elderly or disabled tenants, through to out-of-hours emergency repairs, gas servicing and voids management.

The improved visibility of jobs, related stocks and staff, and integration with subcontractors will enable Hyde's property services team to improve its service through integrated mobile working for better communication with field workers and to track non-productive work, stock control and van replenishment through integration with Grafton Buildbase, improved 'first-time fix' rates, and accurate reporting, delivered on demand and in real time.

Paul Woodham, director, Hyde Property Services, said, "We felt that AccuServ was head and shoulders above the other repair solutions in the market, and the 'can do' attitude of the AccuServ team inspires the confidence we need to meet our operational challenges."



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WAKEFIELD & DISTRICT HOUSING ON THE MOVE WITH CAPITA



Capita has helped Wakefield & District Housing improve productivity by a third following the introduction of its mobile working software.

With responsibility for maintaining the homes of more than 20 per cent of the local population, WDH deals with a wide variety of tenant enquiries every day, ranging from the urgent to the routine. As a result, WDH was one of the first housing providers to equip its maintenance staff with mobile technology, but WDH's other tenant-facing employees were still tied to the office between appointments.

Geoff Kirk, service director for business systems, Wakefield & District Housing, said, "Our work is based in our communities, so why keep technology office-based? "However, the system we



originally used in the repairs team wouldn't work on a company-wide basis but we found Capita's mobile software could offer the all-round approach we needed to do our jobs – anytime, anyplace, anywhere."

Previously, WDH's field-based staff had to come into the office to collect case

details and log incidents. Now, the team of almost 500 employees is fully mobile and can carry out these tasks wherever they are.

Louise Muirhead, senior business analyst for business systems, Wakefield & District Housing, said, "If a tenant is having budgeting difficulties, one of our estate officers can direct the case to our financial well-being team without needing to return to the office, setting help in motion there and then. Or if a resident needs a repair, this is logged on the system straight away and in some cases, the repair can be done by close of play that day.

"Once the information is entered, it is immediately available to the rest of the organisation. The relevant department will know that a tenant spoke to our team that

morning and will know exactly what the issue is, so they can get the right support in place."

WDH reported that mobile working had provided the opportunity to keep costs to a minimum and had increased productivity by 34 per cent.

Muirhead said, "Our field-based employees no longer need desk space. We have a hot-desking system which has reduced our overall need for office space. It also means that employees are not travelling to and from the office regularly, which has resulted in significant savings in car mileage costs.

"Our employees have made the cultural shift towards mobile technology, and their device has become a lifeline for their day-to-day job."

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

Orbit launches digital tenancy sign-ups

Orbit Group has created 'Orbit Move' in partnership with Prodo Digital to provide a faster and easier way to complete the sign-up process for new tenancies. A responsive website and mobile app help Orbit staff and their prospective tenants complete the process in five simple steps.

Unlike other digital sign-up platforms in the housing sector, Orbit Move is an end-to-end process that covers all tenant touchpoints, produces electronic documentation (including digitally-signed tenancy agreements) and populates the existing housing management system.

After the initial data collection and assessment stages, prospective tenants use an interactive online map

to help them understand the rights and responsibilities included in their tenancy agreement, in their own time.

Orbit Move was piloted throughout December 2015 and since January 2016 it has become Orbit's standard lettings and allocations system.

One of the first tenants to use Orbit Move said, "I found the process really easy to follow, with support from my housing officer. It's clearly going to make a big difference for staff and tenants because it's such a quick and simple process. It was great to know if there was anything I didn't understand, I could have spoken to the customer service team using the webchat service."



If tenants can't complete the online process themselves then Orbit staff will do this with them as well as discuss the options available to help them improve their digital skills.

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FROM CONNECTED HOMES TO CONNECTED HOUSING

Jay Saggar, Connected Home Consortium Coordinator

This could be the year in which the internet of things (IoT) finally finds its place in the home with business cases becoming sharper and an increasing awareness among housing providers of the potential value that connected devices can offer their organisations.

More and more housing providers are understanding the value that collecting real-time data on their assets can bring. Smart asset management, predictive repair regimes, data-driven asset refresh cycles and 'first-time fix' maintenance call-outs are all part of the future that many housing providers are planning for.

Furthermore, there are a few housing providers taking it a step further and starting to assert the position of housing in the smart cities agenda. Housing stock is the third, and often overlooked, pillar in a smart city's infrastructure. The housing provider of the future will be able to exchange data with the energy grid and the transport infrastructure in order to deliver low cost and green power to residents and contribute to the efficient movement of people and services round the city. Smart cities offer a new way to imagine joined-up public and private services from health and care to energy and they open up new platforms for citizen engagement and democracy. This intelligent and connected approach to homes, infrastructure and transport will become an essential component of an economy that is increasingly driven by information and, crucially, will provide the new types of jobs our residents will require as automation transforms the nature of work.

But before housing takes its place in the smart city, we first need to get the data flowing between homes and landlords. And it all starts with the connected home. Getting homes connected is moving slowly but we predict this year will see the start of a massive increase in the number of connected homes and with it, the first steps towards reconfigured data-driven businesses.

In order to really build the kind of momentum that will see housing

providers placing large orders for connected devices and correspondingly changing business processes to support a radically data-driven way of working, we expect to see a step up in the scale of pilots and trials commencing this year. With much of the technology being produced now, there is increasing evidence of its technical capability in its own right. What is missing is both experience of its deployment and evidence of its operational and technical capability beyond a few unit installs. A number of technology providers have told us about their intentions to do what hasn't so far been done in a housing IoT pilot, and that is to test deployment at scale.

One of the first to kick off will be 365 Agile's 'smart heating controller' pilot. 365 Agile has ambitiously committed to offering 100 housing providers 50 devices each to trial for free. This is exciting stuff and means there could be 5,000 more connected homes coming online over the next few months. With a commitment across the sector to scale up, we will begin to move away from having the odd connected show home to something closer to a connected housing stock.

With scale comes new challenges

A mass roll-out is exactly what's needed to start testing business cases in practice and it's here where 365 Agile is one of the first off the mark to get housing providers to actively bring new and so far relatively untested technology into their businesses.

Having 1,000s of connected homes online this year is an exciting prospect as it starts to generate the volume of data that warrants serious analytics and from which accurate trends can be drawn. Installing 50-100 in a single provider is also a significant step; so far, most pilots have involved connecting no more than four devices, and often in the homes of staff members rather than tenants. Medium-scale pilots of 50-100 units raise some operational and technical questions about how this roll-out would be executed and what business processes and systems might need to

change to take advantage of the new devices and the data they generate.

From our conversations with housing providers, we have identified some of the key issues that a mid-size roll out will generate:

Resident trust and buy-in

Housing providers will need to find 50-100 residents willing to use new technology which will change their relationship with a key piece of household infrastructure. Residents will need to be on board with the trial and trust the technology, both in a privacy and security sense and in an operational sense. Some form of data-sharing contract is also likely to be needed. Getting over these 'people issues' will be a critical part of any large scale roll-out during 2017 and beyond.

Connectivity

The availability of a resident's wi-fi connection cannot be presumed and even if there is one, accessing it may add more complications. Housing providers need to consider if the properties in which they are trialling have any other form of data connection and if not, how they can use a 4G hotspot to connect the devices. Practical connectivity issues, such as the impact of foil-backed insulation and partition walling on wireless connections and multi-device interference, will also need to become better understood as units are deployed in real-world settings.

Installation

Systems that easily retrofit to existing housing infrastructure, such as thermostats, have some advantage here but operatives will still need some additional training to do this and to support the system in the future. Planning for this is critical to getting installations in quickly and for heating systems, crucially before the end of the heating season!

Asset management integration

One of the key benefits of connected technology is its ability to provide live asset data. Currently, housing and asset management data is relatively static, so

FROM CONNECTED HOMES TO CONNECTED HOUSING

Continued from previous page

new software will be needed to augment this existing data with the potentially vast amounts of new streaming data. This requires housing providers to work with technology firms to understand exactly what data is useful and how it can most usefully be represented.

While some of these issues are likely to be challenging in the short term, the point of a trial of this kind is to face these head

on and develop strategies to overcome them. Early technology requires collaboration and housing providers are organisations well situated to share best practice and develop proven operation strategies.

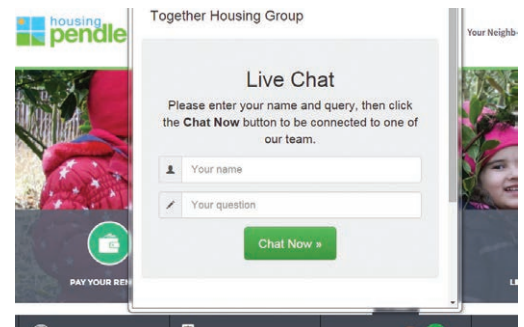
The Connected Home Consortium is helping its members face the challenges of a mid-size implementation to ensure that short-term challenges don't become

long-term barriers that could affect the sector as whole. We ultimately want to see data-driven approaches to housing management, where each connected home functions as part of a larger connected housing stock; from here we open up all sorts of connections to the smart city and beyond.

Jay Saggat is the Connected Home Consortium's coordinator.

TOGETHER HOUSING DEPLOYS WEB CHAT FROM MPLSYSTEMS

Together Housing Group has now deployed the second phase of its multi-channel customer service solution from MPLsystems with the introduction of an advanced web chat facility alongside its existing phone and email channels.



Ian Swithenbank, customer services performance team leader, Together Housing Group, said, "As the digital environment is becoming increasingly popular among our tenants, we wanted to extend our offering by introducing an online web chat solution in line with our digital access strategy."

The web chat solution has been implemented across five of the group's regional contact centres, comprising Chevin Housing, Green Vale Homes, Housing Pendle, Pennine Housing and Twin Valley Homes. To maintain the regional identity of each

of the group's businesses and in line with their new website developments, MPLsystems individually branded each web chat solution.

A tenant can now start a web chat conversation with the contact centre at a click of a button. MPLsystems' iContact platform routes the enquiry to the most suitable agent, based on skill or location, connecting the tenant to the contact centre almost instantly. The agent desktop software then 'screen pops' all relevant tenant information onto their screen including the tenant's initial web chat enquiry, contact details,

previous contact history and any tenancy information.

Although Together Housing's agents are only managing one web chat at a time during the deployment phase, they will eventually be able to manage up to three live web chats simultaneously. If one contact centre becomes busier than others, iContact will route the web chat or other form of communication to another regional team. This means Together Housing will eventually be able to work as one virtual customer service team.

Stephen Batley, group head of customer services, Together

Housing Group, said, "From a business point of view, we wanted to add a web chat solution to improve access for tenants and help reduce the high volumes of calls to the contact centre agents, so we could improve overall efficiency by handling multiple queries at one time.

"Although still in early stages of the deployment, we are looking forward to seeing the impact this will have on the contact centre and what our tenants think about using this as a channel into the customer service centre."

FREE WI-FI DEAL FOR WDH TENANTS

Wakefield and District Housing has partnered with CommunityUK.net to introduce a free wi-fi network across the Wakefield area. The housing provider wants to get all of its 60,000 tenants online by 2020, with the wi-fi network planned to reach all of its 31,000 homes.

WDH and CommunityUK.net have just begun a technical trial of a small area of the overall

network, beginning with WDH's offices and premises and then extended to WDH tenants. If successful, the service will be rolled out to all WDH properties throughout the Wakefield district.

Kevin Dodd, chief executive, Wakefield and District Housing, said, "This project will not only benefit our tenants but could also help to significantly reduce our running costs as a business."



Hyde goes gigabit with Hyperoptic

Hyde Group is soon to offer its tenants access to the fastest broadband service in the UK from Hyperoptic.

Enabled by fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) provider Hyperoptic, the project will be piloted from September 2016 across six of Hyde's existing developments in south London and two of its new-build sites in Southwark and Harrow.

Hyperoptic said that because it installs its fibre broadband all the way into a development, it enables symmetrical 'gigabit' speeds of 1,000Mbps, which are over 135 times faster than 'traditional' ADSL services.

Hyde residents will be able to choose from a number of broadband and landline packages, including the full gigabit service, a 100Mbps or a 20Mbps service, all of which will be available on a contract-free basis and without any need for credit checks.

Shaun Holdcroft, regional director, Hyde Group, said, "We were looking for a partner who could do two things. First, they had to offer something to help our offline social tenants to get online; our latest figures show offline rates among our tenants are as high as 23 per cent, compared with 14 per cent in the rest of the UK.

"Secondly, they had to have experience in providing their services in new-build developments as hyper-fast reliable broadband is increasingly expected by our new customers. Hyperoptic met these objectives and we are pleased to be the first housing association to work out a deal to provide fibre to our residents that benefits all of our customers."



HOME GROUP SAVES £220K WITH TSG

A new knowledge management tool developed by IT specialists Technology Services Group (TSG) has saved Home Group £220,000 in its first year of operation and reduced the training time for new call-centre staff by almost 70 per cent, from one month to just 10 days.

Home Group receives over 24,000 repair calls every month. Inefficiencies within its call centre's processes meant that non-specialist staff ran the risk of sending the wrong information to tenants and causing unnecessary repair visits.

Paul Fitton, senior IS manager, Home Group, said, "Before the introduction of TSG's knowledge management tool, if a plumbing-related problem came through to us, the solution offered to the tenant might have been different depending on the varying levels of experience of the different call-centre agents."

TSG recommended a knowledge management solution using Microsoft's SharePoint Online. A system was configured for Home Group's customer services centre to deal with in-bound calls from its customers more efficiently.

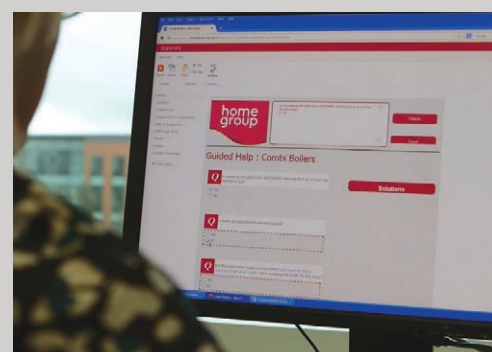
To enable its immediate use, the system was initially deployed as a cloud-based SharePoint solution via Microsoft Office 365 before being migrated to Microsoft SharePoint to fit in with Home's preferred on-premise IT strategy.

Fitton said, "When a call comes in, the call-centre agent collects information which kicks off a workflow, coaching the agent through a series of questions. Depending on the caller's answers, the agent is led step-by-step to the correct solution, which might be anything from noting that the rent has been paid to sending out the correct repair person and automatically booking the time on the Home Group calendar."

Donna Middleton, director of customer experience, Home Group, said, "We don't need to have everyone fully knowledgeable in every area because the call-centre staff are guided along by the knowledge system. As long as they're asking the right questions and putting in the right answers, they'll find the solution.

"The system guides staff through every eventuality, narrowing down to a single

answer which tells them what to do and where to go. It also integrates into the business contractor software and pops the proper appointment on the right calendar, reducing the need for second or even misplaced maintenance calls."





PEAKS & PLAINS – A USER-FOCUSED APPROACH TO THE WEB

Tim Pinder, Chief Executive, Peaks & Plains Housing Trust

Our website has long been a vital channel for servicing our customers. And as a result, we are always looking for ways that it can be improved to help us serve them better.

This year, we are working with digital user experience (UX) agency, Sigma, to further digitalise our services so we can provide a 24-hour offering, and update our website to ensure it fits tenants' needs.

A robust digital offering is important in our sector, as the majority of tenants will have access to a device that means they can get online. A website is also a handy way for customers to report repairs, pay rent, and access more information about important services. So by optimising this channel to ensure it's quick and easy to use, it means other channels, such as a customer service call centre, can be better utilised for customers with additional needs that can't be met through a website.

Why we're investing now

Convenience for our customers is a big driver in making this move now. And by further digitising our services, we will also be able to meet the demands of our customers far into the future – as websites can be changed and updated with new information and emerging trends.

We want our tenants to be able to expect the same user experience with us as they might have with their bank, their insurers, or utility companies. Investing further in this channel will bring it in line with sectors that have been using their websites to help customers for years.

Also, because a digital transaction is 20 times cheaper than one done over the phone, and a huge 50 times cheaper than a face-to-face transaction, it's

easy to see the benefits of investing in digitalising services further. This is particularly useful for us, as tenants can pay rent online.



Sigma built the Peaks & Plains website in 2012, and although the website has served us well (we came second in The Connected Housing Top 100), we're now working on a more user-focused approach. We want to push towards a channel-shift, whereby our tenants go to our website first to try and answer any questions they might have about our services.



Why concentrate on UX?

User experience (UX) is crucial to our business because of the diversity of our tenants. If our tenants were all of a certain age and were tech-savvy, for example, building a website might be a simpler task. But as we don't have a specific target audience, we need to bear in mind that users of nearly all ages and abilities may need to be able to navigate

our website, and they need to be able to do so with ease.

This is where UX comes in.

First, we will run user workshops with a cross section of our tenants to determine how they experience our website. We'll then create a rapid prototype and test this with users before moving into full design and development.

From here, we will adapt the website to tenants' needs, to make sure that it meets their expectations, and is as efficient, informative, and resourceful as possible.

Initially, we will be focusing on the 'your account' section of the website, where our tenants can find information and carry out important tasks to do with their own rent and tenancy. We'll also be working with Sigma to introduce a dynamic FAQ area.

At Peaks & Plains, our main purpose is to 'help improve lives', and refining our online offering is another step in doing just that. By investing in a website now that provides a good user experience for customers, we will be giving them easier access to information and they will be able to take more control of their tenancy. In turn, this will mean customer service teams will be able to give even more attention to tenants with greater needs.

Tim Pinder is chief executive at Peaks and Plains Housing Trust.



LIFE-ENHANCING TECHNOLOGIES FOR HOUSING AND CARE

Jeremy Porteous, Director, Housing Learning & Improvement Network (LIN)

We started the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) with the belief that when great people come together and share ideas, inspirational things happen. What has become apparent over the last few years is that person-centric, connected care, while widely regarded as the future of healthcare, remains a mystery to many people.

With an increasing drive to develop new models of care that reduce the demand on more costly services, the Housing LIN, in partnership with Tunstall Healthcare, has addressed some of the most frequently-asked questions in a bid to eliminate misconceptions and clear the way for the future of connected care.

Funding

People often ask about how telecare can be funded and made financially viable. Thankfully, telecare can be funded in a variety of ways, whether you are a homeowner or tenant, via your local authority means-tested eligibility criteria; by the individual or their families or informal carers through a personal budget; or it can be part-funded through the council or housing provider, and even through a range of grant-making charities.

Specific applications

Many people are keen to know what specific applications the technology has to support everyday living and how it can be implemented without causing distress or upheaval.

Technology can aid various elements of everyday life such as cooking or medication. For medication, it's essential to get dosages and times right. Management can be carried out through medication-monitoring devices which provide prompts and send-out calls to the telecare monitoring centre when medication isn't taken. This allows the response team or next-of-kin to contact the individual and ensure they are up-to-date with their medication.

Cooking and making meals is another important part of daily life but for some individuals living independently, preparing dinner could be a cause for

concern, especially if they have memory problems or a tendency to wander.

Smoke detectors, temperature extremes sensors and gas alarms can be linked to telecare alarm systems which can trigger alerts at the designated response centre. Intelligent cookers are also available which can minimise the risk by detecting that the cooker hob is on but no pan, so will turn itself off, as well as being able to set time periods for cooking.

Links to housing strategy

Housing providers often ask how connected care technology can support their business objectives. This depends on the individual business objectives and issues that are being solved, but new digital technologies can support a number of business objectives, such as:

- The need to provide more proactive, preventive services, such as remote online consultations and medication support;
- The need to provide social activities, befriending and digital inclusion support;
- The need to provide homes that meet the lifetime and lifestyle choices that people aspire to;
- The need to report repairs and maintenance issues via an easy-to-use tablet or app.

Attitudes to technology

People are frequently concerned about a lack of confidence and fears of social isolation with the use of technology. When it comes to attitudes to technology, seeing is believing and examples of real life stories really are the key. The way to describe it is not as technology, but by the outcomes and benefits it provides for people.

Telecare gives communities and people more control; this is about increasing choice, with support targeted where and when it is needed the most, with a round-the-clock back-up service. Technology is not about replacing human contact or restricting independence; it is about helping the person maintain independence, choice and self-

determination so they can live life to the full.

Infrastructure

We are often asked about the move to IP/digital and what this will mean. IP will transform the way information is provided and the speed information moves around. The home of the future will be full of things that are IP-enabled including fridges, cookers, tablets, energy monitors, CCTV and remote-access control. Another concern which often arises is with the safety of mobile/wi-fi. When it comes to safety, it depends on what it is being used for. If the solution is to check your blood pressure or weight twice a day and a late reading is not life critical, then the resilience needs to be less robust than responsive solutions such as telecare, which require immediate attention to an event such as a fall or smoke detector activation.

Awareness

Another subject of great interest is raising the awareness of technology and engaging the whole community. There is a role for providers to enable every person to have the opportunity to benefit from technology appropriate to their needs and provide up-to-date, accessible and easy-to-find information that lists what technology is available in their local area. As learning and improvement is at the heart of what the Housing LIN is all about, we would certainly recommend the deployment of regular and professional awareness training programmes, covering all teams and stakeholders that indicates you are working towards a holistic service which will improve outcomes for individuals and create efficiencies in the system.

Jeremy Porteous is a director of the Housing Learning & Improvement Network.



OMFAX EXPANDS INTO MAINLAND EUROPE

Peter Graddon from Omfax, and René Petersen, Claus Bech-Hansen and John Møller from Glostrup Boligselskab

Specialist customer service solutions provider Omfax Systems, has secured its first housing customer in mainland Europe. Glostrup Boligselskab, a Danish housing provider in Copenhagen, has bought Omfax's Keyfax Interview Online, a web-based repairs reporting tool that enables tenants to report repairs around the clock.

The system enables repairs to be diagnosed easier and faster by taking tenants through a number of steps with diagrams to pinpoint the exact nature of the repair required. It then integrates with the housing provider's own systems to enable the repair to be raised and allows the tenant to select an appointment time. The whole process takes just a few minutes and delivers a seamless service from the tenant's point of view.

John Møller, director, Glostrup Boligselskab, said, "Online services are the norm and our tenants want to be able to raise repairs online at a time that's convenient to them. Equally, we want to deliver our services cost effectively and, in doing so, to ensure that the initial diagnosis is accurate so that when we go to a property, we can fix things first time.

"The clever things about Keyfax Interview Online are not only that it can integrate with our existing software, but that the diagnosis tool enables customers to self-diagnose with a high degree of accuracy. If the repair is the customer's own responsibility, it will also provide this advice to them there and then."

Omfax signs Your Homes Newcastle and South Tyneside Homes

Omfax has been chosen by Your Homes Newcastle which is implementing Keyfax InterView, Repairs Diagnostic and Keyfax Repairs Online, all of which are intended to enhance customer satisfaction by improving the accuracy and consistency of repairs ordering and offering tenants the choice of self-service.

At the same time, South Tyneside Homes has now bought Omfax's ContactView for managing customer service contacts. STH has been using Keyfax InterView and Repairs Diagnostic since 2006.

Peter Graddon, managing director, Omfax Systems, said, "While it's easy to cut costs by stopping doing certain things, smart housing providers are investing in solutions that enable them to balance cost reductions with maintaining, or in many cases, improving, customer satisfaction. With the right tools, cost reduction and high-quality customer experience can go hand in hand."

Housing providers need to integrate digital

According to a new survey by Omfax, while more than half of housing providers' contact centres now routinely manage social media and just under half have a tenant portal, a significant proportion of providers have yet to integrate digital alongside their existing phone and face-to-face contact channels.

Omfax's Graddon said, "Some housing providers are already well on their way to integrated, multi-channel service delivery, but there are still too many stories out there of tenants being 'bounced around' the organisation before their queries are answered.

"Disjointed IT systems that don't allow a single view of the customer and operating structures that aren't built around customer processes still present barriers to high-quality service delivery."

Omfax's survey also found that over 80 per cent of housing providers' contact centres had seen volumes grow by five per cent during the past three years, 35 per cent now offer a 24/7 service, 50 per cent outsource part of their call-handling (mainly out-of-hours services), and from a web perspective, 80 per cent can handle repair enquiries, 60 per cent manage complaints and 50 per cent deal with rent enquiries.

Salix Homes brings free wi-fi to 'silver surfers'

Salix Homes has teamed up with Salford Council to have free wi-fi installed at its eight sheltered housing complexes for the elderly across the city.

The initiative comes after Salford was awarded £2 million from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to install free wi-fi access points in public buildings including libraries and community centres.

Sue Sutton, executive director of operations, Salix Homes, said, "Our aim is to get as many of our older tenants onto the internet as possible, which we hope will help combat the feelings of isolation which are so common for older people and enable them to reconnect with their families and friends online."

Salix Homes has been running basic 'silver surfer' IT sessions for tenants at its sheltered housing complexes, which have proved a real hit with the older generation who are eager to explore the online world.

Hilda Ellis, a Salix Homes tenant, said, "My family bought me a tablet because they said I had to get into the modern world, but I didn't have a clue what to do with it – I didn't even know how to turn it on. The IT sessions have been brilliant. I've learnt how to email and Skype and now I use it to keep in contact with my family in Australia."



Salix Homes tenant Irene Bolton and Greg Muir, community involvement and new initiatives officer at Salix Homes



CCTV – REDUCING THE RISKS YOU SIMPLY CAN'T SEE

James Wickes, CEO, Cloudview

Many years ago I was having lunch with a technology guru called Dr Alan Solomon (you can tell it was the 1990s because we were actually having lunch in a proper restaurant rather than sandwiches around a meeting room table).

Between munching on a large plate of spare ribs washed down with quite a few bottles of Tiger beer, Alan explained to me that it was inevitable and indeed imminent that PC users all over the world would soon be deliberately compromised by what he called 'viruses'. He went on to explain that these viruses would be used to steal data and would be spread un-checked by diskettes promiscuously passed from user to user.

I didn't believe him; I thought he'd had one Tiger too many.

But he was right. His foresight proved, as with so much that has happened since the early 90s technology revolution, that if it could be imagined, it could happen. Alan went on to specialise in fighting computer viruses with Dr Solomon's Anti-Virus Toolkit; as well as helping millions of PC users, he did very well into the bargain.

Fast-forward 20 fascinating, frightening and downright freaky years and we are living in an era where we're constantly, either consciously or unconsciously, connected to the internet via various smart devices or smart objects that have become part of the internet of things.

Thanks to experts like Dr Solomon, when it comes to protecting our PCs and connected devices, we are all very much alive to the threats posed by malicious hackers, viruses and the plethora of malware that's out there.

It's just part of life. And like much of our lives, the things that are really important get overlooked or ignored. Which is perhaps why we've not really woken up to the threats posed to our data and networks by the connection of 'things' to them.

Gartner reckons that in 2016 5.5 million additional 'things' will be connected to the internet each day. That's quite a lot, and I daresay that quite a number of them

will be so-called security devices such as IP cameras and other CCTV systems.

CCTV systems generally record their data back to DVRs or NVRs which often contain considerable processing power and data storage capability. Once compromised, this makes them the perfect gateway for launching an attack on a corporate network. The obvious way to guard against such an attack is through the use of VPNs but this is both clunky and expensive.

So what's the alternative?

Before unashamedly pitching Cloudview as a highly reliable and secure solution to this problem, it's probably worth examining why CCTV systems need to be connected to the internet anyway.

The answer is pretty clear, even if the pictures often aren't. CCTV is pretty ineffective when it can't be reviewed remotely and, as the housing stock under the control of housing providers grows, so does the need to have oversight of an increasing number of remote sites.

However, the cost and practicality of locking down broadband connections with VPNs to all sites with CCTV equipment is prohibitive. Even if this were possible, most legacy CCTV systems require a special client software package or app, severely limiting their usefulness to mere 'point to point' access that demands separate log-ins to access each and every camera.

However, despite those drawbacks, using such systems is not as time-consuming as actually going on site to retrieve footage, as many organisations still have to do. This can take hours. It is a painfully slow process and, in addition to the time spent getting to the site, it often requires a calm demeanour to sift through the badly-designed Anglo-Chinese interface.

Being blunt, the old crop of CCTV systems were not designed to be connected to the internet and have been (in most cases) poorly modified to do so. Once sold, the vendors have little interest in ensuring the ongoing security of their hardware against compromise. Even if

they did, it remains to be seen how they could responsibly access those devices to update them with new software patches or bug fixes.

In contrast, Cloudview has been designed from the start to be a cloud-based service. As such, our ability to perform effectively is intrinsically linked to our ability to ensure that the visual data of our clients is secure, not only from being hacked but from physical theft and vandalism at all points in its life.

As you'll see, we take the subject of security extremely seriously. Once upgraded to Cloudview, visual data originated from a site's CCTV cameras is transported via encrypted tunnels to Cloudview's remote EU-based, ISO-27001 servers where it is encrypted, cryptographically hashed and mirrored across multiple instances. This ensures that clients' visual data cannot be compromised and is securely stored for as long as required.

Cloudview will work with legacy CCTV systems and there's no need for the assortment of extras required by traditional systems, such as VPNs and fixed IP addresses, to enable effective, secure access to CCTV data from anywhere on any device. What's more, as the data and the system that manages it resides in the cloud, a fully administered 'people, places and cameras' permission structure allows broader, controlled access to the visual data.

So, like chocolate fireguards, DVR-based CCTV systems can look useful but, in the white heat of the internet, where instant access to vital data is essential to remain effective, they simply melt away. Cloudview on the other hand is more akin to the latest hi-tech fire protection system. It's strong, light, effective, can be installed quickly, works automatically and won't buckle, break or melt when things start to get hot.

And, if you'll forgive me for flogging this analogy to within an inch of its life, Cloudview will make sure your fingers don't get burnt by the security risks inherent in old-fashioned legacy CCTV.

James Wickes is the CEO of Cloudview.



THE 'DIGITAL BY DEFAULT' INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE FUTURE

Stephen Holford, Chief Customer Officer, Hyperoptic

For a digital inclusion programme to succeed, it's imperative to first understand that demand is linked to supply – put simply, the priority must be the provision and availability of digital infrastructure, which will form the backbone of the programme.

Unfortunately, many housing providers don't realise that they have the power to affect what digital infrastructure options they have and they wrongly believe that they have to accept whatever infrastructure is currently in place. For many, the existing infrastructure is woefully inadequate.

Many only have an antiquated ADSL infrastructure, which only enables a maximum of 17Mbps. In the best-case scenario, they will have fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC) but this is still very limiting – because the fibre stops at the green box at the end of the street, the customers can only get a maximum of 76Mbps but in reality the majority get even less than that, as well as peak-time slowdowns, buffering and frustrating timeouts.

With poor infrastructure, a 'digital by default' programme is hindered before it even begins. Having a poor first online experience will inevitably make an offline tenant less likely to want to go back online. With that in mind, it's crucial to make the underlying infrastructure fit-for-purpose and future-proofed, and then put in place strategies to encourage consistent and ongoing usage among the offline tenants.

An option that is becoming increasingly popular in the private sector is installing fibre all the way into a development, known as fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP). With FTTP, tenants finally have a reliable, hyper-fast broadband service that they can always depend on. The experience when compared against ADSL and FTTC is like night and day; it just works and the

internet becomes another utility that they don't have to worry about.

Enabling this connectivity is very simple. Installation can be done in tandem with other works, whether upgrading an IRS, cabling work or even a standard refurbishment. The fibre is connected using the building's existing ducts and then the cable is taken to each floor and across the ceiling voids. The entire process takes just a few weeks.

Once installed, the tenants have a variety of cost-effective broadband and landline services they can choose from, including a fully symmetrical gigabit service, or a 100Mbps or 20Mbps service. Crucially, these services can be offered very flexibly, with contract-free options that also don't require any credit checks.

Once you have the right infrastructure and a range of products that suit every tenant's needs, there are a number of other things you can do that will enhance engagement and sustained usage among offline tenants.

First, it's key to have a way that tenants can access the internet free of charge; for tenants that haven't been online before, this provides an excellent 'try before you buy' option that can help ease them into regularly using the Internet. Two ways a free service can be enabled is via a free 2Mbps wi-fi service across an estate that will enable web browsing, and free connectivity and PC terminals in communal areas.

With availability fully addressed, the next step is supporting usage with those tenants who have never used the internet before. For them it isn't enough to just provide a high-quality service with free options to ease the transition. Running formal training courses can help teach skills, but a better option is to recruit 'champion tenants' who can help their neighbours.

By having someone that an offline tenant knows and trusts, they will be more inclined to ask questions. For the champion tenant, the incentive could be a year's free service that can be aligned with supporting ten neighbours, showing them how to browse, search and use the internet. Materials could be provided to these champion tenants and the success can be easily measured by how many new tenants are going online.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a housing provider that doesn't agree with the government's 'digital by default' agenda. Internet usage has moved from a nicety to a necessity; it's not just that having access to the internet is proven to improve social and economic welfare; without knowing how to use the internet and regularly going online, a tenant can't access vital government services. Staying offline isn't an option. However, with the infrastructure, service options and training in place, a housing provider can rest assured that no tenants will be left behind.

Stephen Holford is chief customer officer at Hyperoptic.



HOUSING MERGERS – IT ADOPTION OR IT ALIGNMENT?

Chris McLaughlin, CEO, MIS-AMS

Chris McLaughlin, CEO of housing management software provider MIS-AMS looks at how a large percentage of all housing mergers' synergies are dependent directly on IT and often it's the IT integration process that drives the merger timetable. Should you 'adopt' or 'align' your IT systems, and how can you make merging less painful and with fewer delays?

It seems that not a month goes by without news of a merger between two or more large housing providers. Welfare reforms, the loss of grant funding and the government's controversial rent-reducing proposals have acted as a catalyst to speed things up somewhat so that efficiencies can be found faster. Mergers promise a new larger entity, the opportunity to raise significantly more capital and the ability to refinance to fund more ambitious building programmes than would have been possible as smaller, separate entities.

In December 2015, there was news of Affinity Sutton and Circle Housing's intention to merge which, if it goes ahead, would create Europe's largest housing provider. As a single organisation, it would manage around 127,000 homes for almost half a million people. The beginning of February 2016 brought news of Genesis and Thames Valley's intentions to press ahead with their merger to create a 47,000-home landlord with a turnover of more than £370 million. And most recently, news of a merger between two major housing associations in the south of England – Sovereign Housing and Spectrum Housing – would create a 56,000-home landlord and be the largest housing provider in the south and south-west. There are around 1,700 registered housing providers in the UK, but only 350 of them have estates of more than 1,000 properties, so the trend towards mergers between the largest organisations has the potential to alter the social housing sector forever as well as affecting housing IT suppliers. Those

systems that can provide the smoothest and fastest route to technology and process adoption in the new organisation will surely come out on top.

Technology approach

How do you bring two or more organisations together to create unity for the greater good of efficiencies, rather than double your problems and your costs? IT often plays centre stage when it comes to the success or failure of a merger and has the ability to set the timetable depending on which route forward is taken. We have worked with a number of merging organisations and have seen that it mostly boils down to two approaches in technology – IT adoption or IT alignment.

In any market sector, when large organisations merge, there is usually a power struggle and decisions that have to be made based on the direction the new merged business wants to go in. IT adoption happens when one housing provider takes on the other's systems and processes and often occurs when one organisation is significantly bigger than the other. We've worked on various adoption projects, such as the Oaklee merger with Trinity to form Choice Homes, and by using advanced data loaders, we have managed to turn around adoption projects in as little as six to eight weeks.

However, when it comes to IT alignment, the two merging associations appreciate that the other has certain processes that are more effective than its own, are often of a similar size to each other and thus work to find the best bits of both for the new organisation. I firmly believe that the size of each organisation shouldn't play a big part in the adoption vs. alignment debate. It should be a decision based on which technology provides the most efficient solution and the most advanced way of working in order to be fully integrated and provide an advanced workflow engine to streamline the

business processes. However, each approach has pitfalls to be aware of.

Costs and KPIs

The first step in any merger is to create a business case and evaluate the number of IT interfaces you have where there are common software modules in both organisations. Depending on which modules are required, there will be a greater cost of alignment. For example, every software module (e.g. rent accounting, asset management, CRM, customer services and mobile working) will incur a cost for the software license and a cost for the interface within both organisations. The more systems and interfaces an organisation has, the higher the ongoing costs. Buying one integrated solution can eliminate these costs.

It's also important to check each organisation's priorities and compare KPIs to see how similar the goals are before choosing which IT system to move forward with. We've seen cases where organisation A has very different KPIs to organisation B, making it difficult to compare IT systems and benchmark them. For example, 'void turnaround' where a property is empty, undergoes repair and is ready for let, may be measured differently between organisations. One system might quote eight days from empty to re-let while others may quote 20 days to do the same job simply because they've been measuring from different points. We managed to streamline Berwickshire Housing's voids from between 20-28 days down to just eight days. This may act as a driver for which processes to adopt moving forward.

Project teams can also be expensive and remove participants from their usual role in an organisation leading to more costs as roles are back-filled. The project team is required to establish which processes to adopt, and then to ensure that the elements of the existing processes are accurately ratified from one system to the

HOUSING MERGERS – IT ADOPTION OR IT ALIGNMENT?

Continued from previous page

other for the newly-merged organisation to get the best solution. Large IT merger projects can have between six and 14 part and full time project team members from across the merging organisation who will be dedicated to the cause, and if they proceed with an entirely new solution, then a tender process is necessary, adding further time, resource and cost to the project.

With the current climate of government policy changes driving a need for increased efficiencies in housing

providers, IT solutions that drive down costs and allow investment in properties are increasingly more important. We expect to see more investment in systems that provide those efficiencies, especially where asset management, appointment and scheduling, and mobile working is concerned.

Keeping residents happy by providing the services they require drives the IT agenda. Those solutions that provide an integrated and streamlined housing management system and can make

residents' lives easier by providing resident portals, text communications and mobile solutions will ultimately be adopted as mergers become more prevalent.

Chris McLaughlin is CEO of MIS-AMS.

Sunrise streamlines Radian's IT service management

Radian Group has completed the implementation of new IT service management software from Sunrise Software.

Radian Group was formed in 2012 following the merger of three housing providers. Ian Butcher, IT operations manager, Radian Group said, "Our service management system was fine when it was bought for one of the housing providers. It was a small organisation of just a couple of hundred employees with an IT team of just four people. However, after the merger and the overnight expansion to 1,500 people and an IT team of more than 30 people, it could no longer keep up."

Explaining Radian's decision to implement Sunrise's IT Service Management (ITSM) solution, Butcher said, "A key factor was the ability to not only have a solution that could grow with us but which could also move beyond a basic ticketing system.

"We wanted a solution that was aligned with the ITIL requirements, while offering us greater reporting capabilities. We wanted to have the ability to manage groups of people, assign calls to specific user groups, prioritise tasks and put calls on hold. Until the Sunrise deployment we

couldn't do those things which meant that meeting our SLAs was difficult."

The deployment of Sunrise ITSM has allowed Radian to create a customised solution that will adapt to its business and meet the needs of a busy service desk.

Butcher said, "The level of customisation afforded to us from Sunrise ITSM was impressive and it acts more as an engine that we can more or less build anything into and easily adjust.

"With Sunrise, we can quickly develop and adapt the system to deliver what we need right there, right then. From this standpoint alone, we have improved efficiencies across the service desk and among the team, resulting in more time being spent actually resolving support queries."

The Sunrise ITSM solution is used by Radian's front-line service desk team to manage, action and prioritise calls, by the IS team for third-line support for escalated queries, and by the in-house development team to monitor for any bugs and track the status of systems developed in-house.

Butcher said, "Before the introduction of Sunrise ITSM, we couldn't keep track and report on the activities and successes of



the service desk. We wanted the ability to keep track of how we are performing against our SLAs because, before Sunrise ITSM, service calls could quite quickly fall foul of SLAs, although there was nothing we could do about it because we couldn't place queries on hold. Now we have a much more accurate view and can take proactive measures before an issue becomes a problem."

HMS – AT THE HEART OF YOUR ORGANISATION



Housing Technology interviewed experts from Civica, Horton Housing Association, MIS-AMS and Orchard (see page four) on the future of housing management systems (HMS) in the context of new web-based services, the emergence of ERP systems in housing and welfare reform.

The latest generation of HMS

As everyone knows, technology is changing all the time, and although the housing sector doesn't change quite so fast, the past few years have seen a mass of regulatory and legislative changes. So, how do today's latest-generation HMS differ to those from, say, five years' ago?

Civica's executive director for housing and asset management, Jeff Hewitt, said, "Today's HMS don't really differ much from how they looked five years ago. This is down to customer demand, as the majority of HMS suppliers haven't invested in new core technology solutions; instead they are relying on bolt-ons to deliver capabilities such as mobile working, customer care and more modern communication channels, such as SMS and chat.

"For our part, Civica is offering something genuinely new in the market to meet new demands. This is something which most IT suppliers tend to shy away from due to the time and huge investment needed to deliver new systems to the market."



"Every HMS provider will claim their system is the best but, as always, the devil is in the detail."

Martin Nowak, Software Project Manager, Horton Housing Association

Chris McLaughlin, managing director of MIS-AMS, said, "Through the years, the purpose of the HMS has changed. Previously, its sole purpose was to manage data but now, through the maturing of housing providers' processes and procedures, it's being used more and more to identify efficiency savings through automation and analytics.

"Although the term 'big data' is better known now, it has been around for a while. The important thing today is not how to store data but how to use it to realise savings and benefits. Integration is the key to bringing together web browsers and mobile solutions, as is the drive towards leaner and more efficient processes. MIS AMS offers both; excellent integration and efficient processes via its workflow engine and single database."

How to choose an HMS

Alongside their underlying IT infrastructure, an HMS is arguably the most important and business-critical system for every housing provider. So, apart from the usual research, due diligence and RFI/RFP tendering processes, what should housing providers look for when choosing a new HMS?

Horton Housing Association's software project manager, Martin Nowak, said, "Every HMS provider will claim their system is the best but, as always, the devil is in the detail. It is vitally important to establish what standard reporting tools the system have (preferably based on industry standards/frameworks), how flexible it is for setting up different permissions levels and how well it integrates with other systems, such as for finance, floating support and mobile working. It is also essential to visit reference sites to get feedback on the customer service experience and the supplier's responsiveness."

Civica's Hewitt said, "When looking for a new HMS, housing providers should look beyond a system that can just deliver the core functions, such as rent collection, asset management and voids. In our opinion, housing providers need a single platform with fully-integrated customer service capabilities, including CRM, self-service portals and multi-channel communications. Systems that are over 20 years old may have mature functionalities, but they come with the 'baggage' of a database structure and

modular approach and are therefore not built to meet future demands.

"In the past, housing providers have put far too much effort into selecting systems based on detailed functionalities, rather than technology and capability. For example, a system based on modern technologies can be much more efficient and reduce costs through different deployment options, such as cloud hosting. As well as making the back office run more smoothly, a modern system can also offer new ways of working that can extend the use of the system and deliver a better level of service to tenants."



"The majority of HMS suppliers haven't invested in new core technology solutions; instead they are relying on bolt-ons to deliver capabilities such as mobile working, customer care and more modern communication channels, such as SMS and chat."

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

HMS vs. ERP

As Orchard's head of product strategy, Aidan Dunphy, covers in his 'An ERP by any other name' piece on page four, some of the UK's larger housing providers are examining the merits of ERP systems (from the likes of Microsoft and SAP) versus a 'traditional' HMS.

McLaughlin from MIS-AMS said, "With ERP, people argue that 'you get all the components you want' and when you put it on paper, it appears cheap at first. The challenge then is integration because none of the components talk to each other and interfaces are required. For example, if you have five systems as part of an ERP solution, such as one front-end core system and then four peripheral systems, each of those will require annual maintenance. For each side of the interface, you will also pay annual maintenance fees (so, four systems would be eight interfaces). Then you'd like all four systems to talk not only to the core



system, but to each other; the costs begin to spiral upwards. So for something that could have been integrated with one supplier, one annual maintenance fee and not requiring any interfaces, you suddenly have 16 separate costs which, individually, may seem small but as a whole are expensive.

"And what happens if I fall out with one supplier? You look at new products to replace the existing one and then pay new interface costs. And then, what if I have a problem with an interface? You get several suppliers around the room with each stating that it's not their system causing the problem! Overall, ERP appears cheap at first, but the reality never supports this."

Civica's Hewitt said, "In theory, a full ERP system, and by this I mean more than a housing, finance and HR system bolted together, can offer efficient end-to-end processing, reduced reworking, streamlined processes and deliver sophisticated costing and performance information.

"However, ERP systems have been mainly developed to serve the manufacturing and logistics sectors and the specialist nature of housing providers means that they need massive investment in order to deliver the complex and detailed processes found in this sector. In the current financial climate, it is unlikely that many housing providers will invest in expensive ERP solutions when a better cost/benefit balance could be achieved through a specialist HMS which incorporates many of the desirable features of ERP systems but in a form more appropriate for scale and manageability."

The effects of universal credit, welfare reform and pay-to-stay

In previous articles in Housing Technology, we looked at the likely effect on housing providers' IT systems of the introduction of universal credit, welfare

reform and pay-to-stay. In general terms, most of the effects seemed to be more about rethinking processes, data changes and how IT systems would be used rather than any functional IT changes. Does the same apply to HMS?

Civica's Hewitt said, "When addressing areas such as universal credit, welfare reform and pay-to-stay, HMS suppliers are likely to strengthen the income recovery areas of their systems. Incorporating much stronger debt profiling and collection capabilities, along with facilities to support tenants with debt management, will allow them to stay ahead of the curve. Much more information on 'the person' will be incorporated into systems so that housing providers can keep an eye on their tenants, including detailed personal profiles and financial information.

"Furthermore, the mobility of systems will become much more important in order to support more 'on the ground' working and to allow estates officers to get closer to tenants by having access to the same systems and information when face-to-face as when in the office."



"With ERP, people argue that 'you get all the components you want' and when you put it on paper, it appears cheap at first but the reality never supports this."

Chris McLaughlin, CEO, MIS-AMS

McLaughlin from MIS-AMS said, "We have evaluated our HMS against universal credit, welfare reform and pay-to-stay. Based on the government's existing requirements, our system can handle all of them and there is no need to change the product at all. Having seen recent articles in Housing Technology, I know this isn't true for other HMS suppliers, especially regarding pay-to-stay."

HMS market volatility & liquidity

Given the long replacement lifecycles

of HMS and the highly-strategic nature of their implementation, some people believe that the HMS market lacks volatility and liquidity. Or to put it another way, are there enough customers to match the number of HMS suppliers?

Civica's Hewitt said, "The availability of new solutions, and the need to adopt new technologies to support efficiency savings as a result of budgetary cuts, is driving the housing market like never before. Social housing organisations don't just want to review the systems they are using but need to review their systems to respond to the pressures of efficiency savings, customer demands, budgetary constraints and new ways of working."

Last word goes to McLaughlin from MIS-AMS who said, "At the moment, there are enough customers to match the number of HMS suppliers; after all, there are around 1,700 housing providers and only about 10 main HMS suppliers. However, if the trend for housing mergers becomes more prominent, I think this may become harder for certain suppliers over time."

Housing Technology would like to thank Jeff Hewitt (Civica), Martin Nowak (Horton Housing Association) and Chris McLaughlin (MIS-AMS) for their editorial contributions to this article. Please also see the related article from Orchard on page four.



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"Tapping into personal histories and stories to get people started online sounds good to me."

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LETTER FROM CAPITA – IOT & ASSET MANAGEMENT

Roger Birkinshaw, Housing Director, Capita

Sir, I read with interest the previous edition of Housing Technology (January 2016), especially the articles on the internet of things and smart asset management, and felt compelled to write with my observations on a couple of points raised.

Being already involved in the delivery of an IoT project at Two Castles Housing, I wholeheartedly agree with the observation from Zonr's Robert Dent that, "Where the new generation of asset management software encompasses a technology shift such as IoT meters and sensors, housing providers will benefit significantly from the accurate real-time data delivered by on-site asset monitoring," and I'm really excited about the initial results we are seeing coming through.

This collaborative project was covered in November's edition of Housing Technology (still available online) and I look forward to sharing the results (some surprising!) in future editions.

However, I do challenge the assertion in the smart asset management feature from Civica's Jan Maes that, "At the moment, housing providers will benefit most from having separate asset management systems. This is mainly due to the fact that the IT suppliers have been focusing on separate housing management or asset management systems but haven't provided functionalities to do both together."

As one of the main IT suppliers to the housing sector, Capita has, in its OpenAssets solution, direct integration to its housing management system, OpenHousing.

It was built that way. No doubt, being part of the same system does provide unique benefits such as not having to rely on third-party integration or interfacing, a single version of the truth, true offline mobile working, and responsive online access for compatibility with smartphones.

OpenAssets was also built to work as a standalone solution and, like many other asset solutions on the market, offers interfacing to other housing software.

The real beauty of a system which offers a complete solution, as part of an established housing management system, but also as a solution designed to work as a standalone, is the proficiency, flexibility and choice it provides for the housing sector.

Roger Birkinshaw is the housing director at Capita.

DXW adds new recruits from the Government Digital Service

DXW, a digital services provider to the public sector, has made two new appointments from the Government Digital Service to support its growing business.

Dave Mann, previously a product manager at GDS and with 15 years' experience on government digital projects, has been appointed as DXW's head of engagement. Mann was a key member of the team that built the alpha version of GOV.UK in 2011 and led the technical transition of over 750 websites to the site in 2013.

Stacey Phillips joins DXW as its project delivery manager after working on digital projects for the Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions and GDS.

DXW now has a team of 16 people that works alongside government agencies to create digital services that are simpler, clearer and faster than the alternatives, so that people genuinely enjoy using them. To date, DXW has delivered more than 40 digital projects for central and local government, the NHS and the housing sector.

Harry Metcalfe, managing director, DXW, said, "There's a lot of competition for the best people, but the advantage of what we do is that we make real people's lives a little bit better, whether it's managing your rent or paying your council tax. We can actually see the results by looking at the number of people using the sites and the digital services we develop."



DATA PROTECTION – DOES IT REALLY APPLY TO US?

Paul Rowley, Head of Information Services, Havebury Housing Partnership

For housing providers, storing significant amounts of personal data is now the norm. Much of it is a natural response to the challenges thrown at the sector over the last few years, such as welfare reform and universal credit, as well as identifying protected characteristics to ensure that we are offering a fair service that reflects diversity among our tenants.

We are typically well-run businesses with good governance. I would say the majority of housing providers want to do the right thing, understand their obligations, employ internal auditors, have policies in place for everything and have the benefit of quite simple business models. So, surely we are all 'acing' those data protection principles then?

Well, no. The sector has always had a 'we know you're there but if we don't make eye contact, you'll leave us alone' relationship with the Information Commissioner and a 'does that really apply to us?' attitude towards the Data Protection Act 1998. Why? Well, I have a theory about why the sector is generally not as hot on data protection as it should be.

The first reason is housing management systems. They just don't have the tools within them to handle the existing principles that came into force 16 years ago. You would think that by now we would have the appropriate controls within those systems to manage data retention, ensure appropriate consent is recorded, handle data subject access requests and allow the secure transit of data to other parties.

The second reason is attitude. We just don't care that much about it as businesses. Only IT people tend to get worked up about it and everyone else just wonders why they are getting so animated. It isn't difficult to resolve this one; making everyone aware of data protection legislation is an absolute must and the ICO would expect annual refresher training to be mandatory. You should use this as a mechanism to drive the data protection agenda in your organisation.

More importantly, there is the causal link. The systems are not compliant because

we don't think it's that important. Also, because the systems are not compliant, we don't want to draw attention to that. One of the best things I've done is to implement privacy impact assessments (PIA) for new systems, processes and policies. Rather like when you get to see how clean your teeth really are, a PIA is a nice big disclosing tablet which shows you how you can provide privacy and comply with the DPA. It is also worth mentioning that if you do one of these as part of your next IT tendering process, you'll be amazed at the discussions you will have.

Typically, to get change requires a catalyst. The good news is there is a catalyst in the near future which will allow you to up your game.

As Father Christmas was starting to prepare his Christmas deliveries, the three institutions that form the EU (parliament, commission and council) reached their tripartite agreement on the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a replacement for the 1995 directive that most of you will recognise as the Data Protection Act 1998.

The EU realised that a single harmonised framework for data protection was the way forward, replacing the patchwork quilt of legislation for each country that met the minimums of the 1995 directive, but also reflected the very specific attitudes of the each country.

The new agreed texts will now go back to the council and the parliament for ratification. Once the final text has been translated into all of the EU languages, it will be formally signed by the presidents of the parliament and the council and then published in the Official Journal.

It should be in force from 2018. I won't bore you with lots of detail; you can look it up online (make sure you read the latest text agreed in December 2015) or engage with one of the data protection consultants in the sector. What you can't afford to do is to keep your head buried in the sand.

Hopefully, we all have finance departments; teams of people who specialise in understanding where money enters the business in the form of income,

what it does while it's there, and where it leaves in the form of expenditure. Transactional data is recorded and reconciliations are carried out to ensure that we can all comply with accounting practices. Why? Money has a value.

Well, information has a value too. It has a value to the person whose data it is. It also has a value to the business. Indeed, if the value of the data is zero, we shouldn't hold onto it. So, why not track it and ensure that it still has value? The new regulations tighten up on 'consent' to the point where we will have to start tracking personal data. When a tenant fills out a form, we need to record that data along with some metadata that says that it came from a particular form that we received on a certain date, that they gave explicit consent and that we said we would store it for a certain amount of time or delete it once it was worthless to us. We need the record keeping because if we fail to record things, we could be liable to a fine of 2 per cent of our turnover. Can you think about how you would record this metadata for each element of data, or even type of data, in your housing management system?

Well, if we apply the right amount of pressure to housing management system providers, then we will get the tools to manage information in that way, to start thinking about it as a valuable entity, just like the money. After all, you wouldn't buy a housing management system that couldn't handle income correctly. So, we need to ensure that they will work with the new regulations and that they support us. I would urge user groups for housing systems to start discussing this as soon as you can to provide a set of standard requirements for them to implement in their systems.

In the meantime, start to think about data protection in everything you do. Privacy impact assessments are a great idea to help you do that and you could start doing these now. Start now, but start small.

Paul Rowley is head of information services at Havebury Housing Partnership.



EFFECTIVE IT HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT – AND HOUSING PROVIDERS KNOW IT

Trevor Hampton, Director of Local Government & Housing, Northgate Public Services

We recently surveyed a number of professionals in the housing sector on how they see IT helping them deal with the myriad pressures they face. The results were, to put it mildly, eye opening.

Far from being a drain on resources, technology was the saviour. 97 per cent said that IT solutions were important to their ability to drive efficiencies in light of recent budget cuts. IT isn't regarded as an expense, they seem to be saying, but as the key to improving their bottom line and the cornerstone of their future customer engagement strategies.

It's an understanding that is translating into concrete change. Over a third of housing providers are planning to overhaul their IT in the next two years, rising to more than half over a five-year time span.

Why are they doing this now? For many, it's about funds. Four out of five are looking to reduce costs, with three out of five investing in IT to improve their efficiency.

Some of the biggest opportunities to save are coming through the way they communicate with customers. The most popular ways to interact with housing providers are 'old school', resource intensive methods such as phone and face-to-face. Helping customers digitally engage in other ways was, according to the survey, an immense opportunity.

In particular, many involved saw great potential for self-service where residents can go online and, given the right tools, find solutions for themselves.

Wolverhampton Homes understands both the challenges and the opportunities that new technologies are creating to engage with residents across its 23,000 homes.

Guided by their vision of unlocking people's potential through housing, skills and technology, they have set a target of getting 50 per cent of residents signed up to self-service by April 2017, with Northgate acting as its IT partner.

Wolverhampton Homes chose a range of self-service tools and launched a new approach that promotes the wider benefits of going online and enables staff to provide support at every stage. A range of customer-facing processes, from rent payments to property searches, can now be managed by residents themselves, and providing mobile access to the core housing management system helps staff to provide back-office functions more efficiently.

After consulting with customers and running pilot programmes that provided free connectivity to homes, they realised that increasing the take-up of online services required a different approach.

As Philip Toni, resources director at Wolverhampton Homes, said, "Many of our customers are not online at all, and some may never be, so we wanted to find the best way to help them get on in life. By working with local partners to promote other reasons to go online, from retail discounts and social networks, we can help our residents to access much broader benefits as well as get a faster response to housing queries.

"Our 'digital first' programme runs throughout the whole organisation. It not only encourages people to go online, it also equips staff with the tools they need to work more productively and to support residents at every point of contact. We basically don't want our customers to miss out on the benefits of being online."

This underlines a key finding from the broader survey work done by Northgate Public Services. Half of residents aren't online, or just lack access to appropriate technology. Compounding the issue is that close to 40 per cent of residents just simply aren't aware of all their options when it comes to communicating with their housing provider.

Faced with similar problems, the Wolverhampton Homes digital outreach team is helping tenants who aren't online through community events and face-to-face contact. The team works in a variety of places, from setting up in shopping

centres and community centres to calling door to door, in order to show tenants what they'll miss out on by not being online, then helping them with advice and training on devices.

The housing provider also manages a number of 'one-stop shops' where residents can get advice from staff, ask questions or pay rent. They are changing from the traditional model, with staff behind a counter, to digital hubs with self-service kiosks and floor walkers with tablets.

By enabling greater mobile working, Wolverhampton Homes is also helping to improve how other staff engage with residents in other areas. Staff have been provided with tablet PCs which allow them to access the housing solution on the move. By training them in how self-service works, they can also use those tablets to help customers who need extra encouragement or support.

As well as aiming to get 50 per cent of residents signed up for self-service by April 2017, it is also aiming to reduce the number of general enquiries received face-to-face or over the phone by 50 per cent and will soon roll out greater use of SMS services.

Wolverhampton Homes is a good example of a housing provider that understands the issues facing them and has developed a clear digital strategy to help. They're not alone – close to a third of providers are overhauling their IT in the next two years.

It's clear we're in a critical period of change that I believe will determine not just how well housing providers serve their customers, but also their ability to thrive.

Trevor Hampton is director of local government and housing at Northgate Public Services.



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