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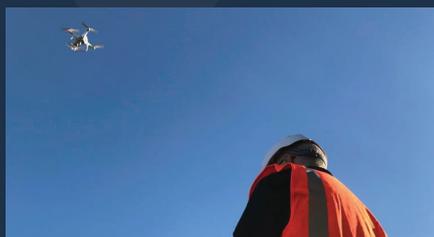
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EDITOR'S NOTES

**HOUSING
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Technology's up, down and all around

As you will read on page 6, we have published our 'E-State of the Nation 2018/19' report (now available from www.housing-technology.com/2018report), covering how housing providers are using (and plan to use) technology for their internal business operations and external tenant services. Amid the wealth of up-to-date research and analysis within the report, a few points are worthy of particular attention:



IT decision-making

The overall trend is for the wishes of housing providers' business departments to influence over 70 per cent of technology-related decisions. This is a huge change from as little as five years' ago when business users were content (or at least had little choice) to 'get what they were given' by their IT departments. This is also a significant development from (but rather different to, from a strategic perspective) isolated incidences of 'shadow IT', i.e. business users signing up for their own preferred cloud-based services. This change in the dynamics of housing providers' decision-making doesn't undermine the strategic importance of their IT teams; on the contrary, it clearly demonstrates the

undeniably fundamental importance of IT to housing providers' operations and the willingness of their business and IT teams to collaborate towards shared goals, rather than trying to mistakenly ring-fence their own territories.

Application dissatisfaction

When the respondents to our survey (on which the report was based) were asked to rate the strategic importance of their various line-of-business applications and their satisfaction with them, there was a considerable gulf between their ratings of the relative importance of their various business applications and their actual satisfaction with them.

Growing technology budgets

Despite the widespread talk in the housing sector about austerity measures, rent freezes, welfare reform, increased regulatory scrutiny and the consequent need to 'do more with less', one glimmer of optimism is that housing providers' technology budgets are generally increasing by an average of 17 per cent. This underlines our first point about the importance of IT; even if the rest of their operations are being squeezed every which way, most housing providers recognise that technology has the potential to deliver incredible returns (both quantitative and qualitative) if applied and used wisely.

If you'd like to know more about these topics and the many others covered in 'The E-State of the Nation 2018/19', please see www.housing-technology.com/2018report.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS



**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY
– EVENING RECEPTION**

28 November 2018

Pizza Express, London

housing-technology.com/events/reception2018



HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2019

6-7 March 2019

Q Hotels' Oxford Belfry, Oxford

housing-technology.com/events/ht19

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NIHE AWARDS MULTI-MILLION POUND DEAL TO ORCHARD

Orchard has won a multi-million pound managed services contract with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE).

The contract is part of a wider 'IT Futures' project for NIHE, including migrating its Orchard housing management system and other business applications to IT Assist, the Northern Ireland government's shared IT services organisation.

As part of the new contract, Orchard will further its service provision with extended out-of-hours support and system monitoring through a managed service provision, provided seven days per week across all eight of NIHE's Orchard Housing environments.

Sean Nolan, head of IT services, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, said, "We are very pleased to have awarded this

contract and we're looking forward to working with the Orchard team to deliver an innovative service to meet the demands of our customers in a constantly evolving digital world."

Joanna Lewis, head of sales, Orchard, said, "It's fantastic that we have secured this contract to provide our managed services to NIHE, one of our biggest customers since 2007."

CLANMIL SIGNS UP FOR CASTLETON'S COMMUNITY SOFTWARE

Castleton Technology has won a five-year contract with Clanmil Ireland to implement its latest cloud-based housing management system, Castleton Community.

Castleton said that its Community software is designed for housing providers with fewer than 1,000 properties who typically struggle with capacity issues as well as limited IT infrastructure investment.

Jimmy Rogers, sales and marketing director, Castleton Technology, said, "We have selected essential modules from our main suite of housing software and created 'lite' versions suitable for the needs of smaller housing providers. And while customers might start with this lite version of our solutions, Castleton Community is fully scalable to allow more modules to be added as and when needed."

Michael Haynes, chief executive, Clanmil Ireland, said, "We reviewed the options on the market at a time when Castleton

Community was in its development stages. We were keen to see the idea grow as it offers the ideal set of solutions for our growing organisation.

"We chose Castleton because of their established housing solution, which is well known in the housing sector. This, plus the launch of their Community software means it was a perfect fit for an organisation of our size."

The first phase of Clanmil Ireland's implementation will cover the main housing management system, Castleton EDM lite and Agile lite (Castleton's mobile working solution), with the second phase to include Castleton's Financials software.

Haynes said, "Looking at our internal business case, we quickly realised that Castleton could give us an excellent return on investment and the solution will also let us transform our business to meet the challenges of a digital age."

Civica wins £490k deal with Community Housing

Community Housing Group has signed a five-year contract with Civica worth £490,000 to implement its cloud-based Cx housing and Keystone asset management platform.

With the aim of retaining its 90 per cent tenant satisfaction rating, Community Housing wanted to gain greater data insights into how to deliver better, more personalised services to its tenants. The Civica Cx and Keystone software will give Community Housing's staff access to a single, real-time view of all tenant and property

data at any time and on any device, as well as comprehensive reporting capabilities.

Mel Bailey, project manager, Community Housing Group, said, "We chose Civica's Cx housing and Keystone asset management platform because they have the integrated management capabilities we need to make our processes more tenant-centric and drive long-term efficiencies."

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GET HOUSING TECHNOLOGY'S 'THE E-STATE OF THE NATION' REPORT

Housing Technology has just published 'The E-State of the Nation 2018/19' report, covering UK social housing providers' current and future plans for their IT estates and how technology underpins all of their business operations. The report is based on a comprehensive online survey of over 150 senior IT and business executives from UK housing providers by our research team. The report can be ordered now from: www.housing-technology.com/htr18_orderform.

DO YOU KNOW:

- Who makes the IT decisions these days?
- Which are most and least popular business applications?
- Where does housing innovation come from?
- What are the IT budget trends?
- Why is inter-application integration so difficult?
- What are the key factors for digital transformation?
- Where are housing providers making their future IT investments?
- How are IT services being delivered?

To find out the answers to these questions and many more, you can order 'The E-State of the Nation 2018/19' report now from: www.housing-technology.com/htr18_orderform.

Some of the report's key findings are:

- **Business vs. Technology Decisions** – Housing providers' business teams now control 70 per cent of technology-related decisions.
- **Business & IT Achievements** – Upgrades to housing providers' IT infrastructures were the most commonly-cited achievement, followed by mobile working and dynamic scheduling and tenant self-service.
- **Business & IT Goals** – Housing providers' goals are focused on using technology to develop their online self-service and omni-channel capabilities, alongside cost reductions, rethinking business processes and incubating innovation.
- **Sources of Innovation** – One-third of housing providers' ideas for innovations come from their own staff, followed by ideas from their IT suppliers.
- **Digital Transformation** – Housing providers' most important developments are around self-service portals, mobile working, application integration, and workflow and process automation.

- **Business Applications** – There is a significant gap between the importance of housing providers' main business applications and their actual satisfaction with them. Document management, CRM and self-service stand out for actually attracting a negative measure of satisfaction.
- **Application Integration** – The most common barrier to better integration between business applications is dealing with a myriad of legacy systems, compounded by the cost of external integration experts and the lack of open APIs from housing application suppliers.
- **Technology Delivery Models** – On-premise delivery is still used for the majority of technology, followed by around a quarter of cloud-based services.
- **Budgetary Expenditure & Metrics** – The majority of technology budgets are spent on operational expenditure and new IT projects. Annual IT budgets are increasing by almost one-fifth. The turnover of an average housing provider is £68 million, covering around 12,000 properties, supported by 400 staff and 15 IT staff.

The report covers: technology supplier ratings, business & IT goals & achievements, business vs. technology decisions, sources of innovation, digital transformation, business applications, technology infrastructure, barriers to application integration, technology delivery models, operational vs. capital expenditure, new IT projects vs. business as usual, and housing metrics.



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AAREON RELEASES 360 SELF-SERVICE PORTAL

Aareon has announced the latest release of its 360 self-service platform, designed to enable housing providers to digitally transform their tenant, staff, supplier and property management operations.

From a tenant's perspective, Aareon 360 gives them full online self-service access to a wide range of information, enabling them to transact seamlessly with their landlord whenever they want, using their own device. Aareon reported that it had invested heavily in delivering a slick consumer-style interface to make the system extremely friendly to use.

Using the system's online hub, tenants can check their tenancy information, review financial balances, organise repair appointments and report ASB issues. The Aareon 360 portal also includes a payment plan component, enabling tenants to set up a payment agreement and pay arrears in a planned way. The system also has an income and expenditure budgeting facility, with a set of configurable questions, so that tenants can calculate their current financial

status, submitting it directly into their landlord's housing management system.

From a staff perspective, Aareon 360 enables portal-based access to all relevant tenant information, enabling agile working anytime and anywhere.

The contractor version of the portal helps to streamline a housing provider's relationship with their suppliers, enabling contractors to access data and interact with a housing provider's back-office systems, removing the need for time-consuming, expensive and error-prone telephone- and paper-based ordering and billing.

The system can also interact with data from IoT-enabled devices in tenants'

properties in order to create alerts and events in back-office systems.

Paul Lock, product manager, Aareon UK, said, "360 delivers a full picture of your 'housing world', regardless of who or where you are. By delivering digital transformation, the new system helps housing providers to drive value for money, boost efficiency and to place tenants at the heart of their operations."



Chelmsford council gets OmniLedger for homelessness



Chelmsford City Council is now using OmniLedger's Pyramid housing management system to help with homelessness and temporary accommodation.

Dianne Gable, project manager, Chelmsford City Council, said, "In the past, our housing service recorded the data for properties and tenancies in different locations. As a consequence of this approach and the fast turnover of our tenancies relating to temporary accommodation and homelessness, we couldn't provide accurate reporting for expenditure and income collection.

"By implementing a full housing management system, we wanted to solve this issue by tightening our internal practices around billing, rent collection, payments and invoicing, as well as improve the flow of accurate information from our housing partners and other external agencies through better systems integration and development."

During demonstrations, we were delighted to find that OmniLedger's Pyramid Housing Management System addressed virtually every point that was outlined. OmniLedger had also shown that information could quickly be extracted from Pyramid in a wide variety of analysis formats, using either standard reporting tools or a custom report generator. This kind of reporting would enable the Council to monitor key performance across the Housing Service and identify areas of improvement.

After the council decided to go ahead with Pyramid, OmniLedger guided the

council through the implementation process and personalised the system to their requirements, including defining its own data sets, mapping the council's arrears process, designing bespoke templates for printed and digital



documents, integration development for its receipting and housing benefit system, data collection and validation processes, and GDPR compliance.

Gable said, "Having gone live with Pyramid, activities that would have previously taken a day to do now take no more than 30 seconds to complete."



WHAT WILL A DIGITAL HOUSING PROVIDER LOOK LIKE?

Paul O'Reilly, Head of Account Management, Aareon UK

'Change... then more change' seems to be the housing regulator's mantra; there are a slew of new initiatives each year, but do they deliver any more homes?

It's interesting to study the sector's future in this context, with some digital technologies already helping housing providers to meet demands and others still over the horizon. But what will a digital housing provider look like?

The table right, shows a housing provider's current core functions.

So where can and will technology help?

Management

Many staff are given an ever-wider range of tasks, while being essentially home- and field-based. This is enabled through integrated mobile working software interacting with the housing provider's back-office systems.

Housing management now increasingly follows other service-based industry models, whereby customers use social media, portals or apps to self-select appointments through the housing provider's dynamic scheduling engine. Tenant satisfaction will increase as slick services become ever easier to access 24/7.

Key to tenancy lifecycle management is the organisation's tenant knowledge, where tenancy sustainment is made more effective by creating alerts through algorithms that connect previously disparate data from a variety of business applications.

Waiting-list applications are now received via portals, with viewings and sign-ups done through staff mobiles. Tenants are now automatically emailed electronic documents, such as tenancy agreements, with workflows ensuring a 28-day follow-up.

Property

Property services is another area where data is key. Property services' managers already use mobile working to gather

FUNCTION	PURPOSE
MANAGEMENT	Operations, such as on-boarding tenants, allocating properties and managing tenancies
PROPERTY	Managing responsive and planned maintenance, guided by data-informed decision-making
REPAIRS	In-house, or where a third-party maintenance provider manages the works on a housing provider's property portfolio
FINANCE	Manages finance, including bank accounts, payments, debts, funding and treasury
CARE & SUPPORT	Assesses and provides support to defined tenant groups
DOESN'T EXIST YET	Out-of-the-box business thinking and innovation

stock data. However this data, which was previously one-dimensional, is being transformed into building information models (BIMs) – 3D building renderings. When studied, these reveal detailed metadata and associated documents, such as CP12 certificates. Better still, users will soon be able view this through augmented-reality (AR).

Surveying has also been revolutionised. Drones operated by CAA-qualified surveyors film inaccessible areas of buildings. Detailed data extracts of properties requiring surveys are uploaded from the integrated asset management module into the app to create survey 'fly-lists'.

Much property services work is now predictive-maintenance. Where a property's devices such as water pumps, boilers, damp sensors and door-entry systems are web-enabled, housing providers can use their portal to aggregate all the third-party device data that has been captured. As data flows are aggregated, portal analytics can automatically trigger repair actions.

Asset management data is also identifying the most reliable device and equipment makes. Even when devices don't fail, the system records usage, such as how long boilers run for. Planning is becoming more logical, thereby eliminating the replacement of devices purely based on their age, when in fact it might have hardly been used.

Finance

Transactions flow smoothly through an integrated financial system containing supplier and tenant accounts data. This information is mainly processed at runtime, when the rents module runs the debit and period-end. However, some tenant groups are subject to non-property-based charges which come into the sales invoicing function via an integrated service charge module. These charges can be sent to tenants via an outsourced mail fulfilment house despatching documentation from an association's electronic files. Recipient tenants are automatically highlighted within the system when planned works are ordered and tendered for.

Procurement is increasingly done via a 'punch out' facility, integrating into the financial-system via the association's portal platform, enabling real-time pricing and paper-free purchasing.

On the other side of the coin, customers access portal-based, self-billing electronic statements with payments made through portals and apps.

The association's external repair contractors now interact via its supplier portal, eliminating paper and saving huge sums of money. Invoicing is within the same workflow, so manual invoicing becomes obsolete.

Finance directors now have full cross-organisational visibility of the integrated

WHAT WILL A DIGITAL HOUSING PROVIDER LOOK LIKE?

Continued from previous page

single database. The auditors are happier too because they see a transaction's path from source to destination.

Repairs

In the past, telephone calls used to initiate this resource-heavy process, with printed orders for contractors who submitted paper invoices. Now, because the workforce is allocated by dynamic scheduling, tenants arrange responsive repairs via an association's branded app or online portal. After a brief diagnosis, they can choose possible appointment slots. Once chosen, the appointment is allocated via an operative's mobile in real time.

Performance and productivity information flows seamlessly back from the operatives' mobiles, identifying continuous improvement or training requirements.

Supply chain management has transformed. Now outsourced to specialist partners, materials management is based on van stocks that update via operatives' mobiles. As van-stock levels deplete, supplier reorders are automatic.

Care and support

Associations serve evolving demographics, particularly the property types most needed, the tenant groups living there, and the services required. The emerging challenge is how to keep older customers living independently at home for as long as possible. Future digital engagement with health and social care agencies is therefore crucial.

Associations now use customer knowledge, from numerous daily interactions to personalise care and support. Where customers consent,

sensors identify events and trends, such as differing heating levels, with analytics tools learning when devices such as kettles are expected to be used. Unusual patterns trigger alerts to check the tenant's wellbeing. Giving tenants fall sensors and blood-pressure monitor watches also helps greatly.

Chargeable services, such as cleaning, can be offered too. The association's portal enables mini-social networks to be created within community blocks, with tasks shared and tenants brought closer.

The head of care and support now works more closely with health bodies and where permissible, planning will be increasingly co-ordinated, ensuring that fewer vulnerable tenants are discharged into homes alone.

Doesn't exist yet...

As data is now a core asset, there is an awareness across management teams of the value of data, meaning that associations' strategic decisions are now largely data-led, not hunch-led. Ergo, CEOs can now think outside the box...

However, as traditional funding dries up, and the need to develop homes becomes more pressing, how will chief executives 'square the circle'?

For example, take a housing provider operating in a large town. A growing university creates a busy private-rented sector. Which organisation has the most experience and resources for managing residential and maybe even commercial property? With their existing portal platforms, housing providers could run external services for other landlords to create new revenue streams. This could be extended to repairs, asset

management and surveying, along with gas and electrical.

Caretaking, run via self-service, dynamic scheduling and mobile working, could be offered to other local property companies. This might extend into facilities management using the association's facilities platform.

These business areas were previously non-existent because nobody thought 'outside the box'. Collaborative technology facilitates such creative ideas.

Finally, the big picture...

The over-riding theme here is that next-level networking brings stakeholders and their data together to streamline processes and drive efficiency.

One single, central-system (i.e. the association's knowledge repository) becomes the hub of this network, with analytics driving workflows. Self-service becomes the default, while the consequent resource savings mean that those in greatest need or who can't operate online receive the face-to-face support necessary.

This article is a shortened extract from a longer, forthcoming supplement from Aareon UK and Housing Technology on 'The digital housing provider of the future'; please email news@housing-technology.com if you would like to receive a copy of the supplement.

Paul O'Reilly is head of account management at Aareon UK.

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DRONING ON IN HOUSING...

Matthew Stinson, Director, Raven Drones

Drones have taken off (excuse the pun) in a big way over the past couple of years. Once the preserve of the military, drones (or small unmanned aircraft [SUA]) are now used in a wide range of markets, from the aerial surveillance of crops and search and rescue operations to the inspection of wind turbines in remote locations. However, their use in social housing has been limited until now. In this article, we will explore some of their potential uses within housing, outline some of the regulatory considerations, and consider what the future might hold.

Are you using drones for roof surveys?

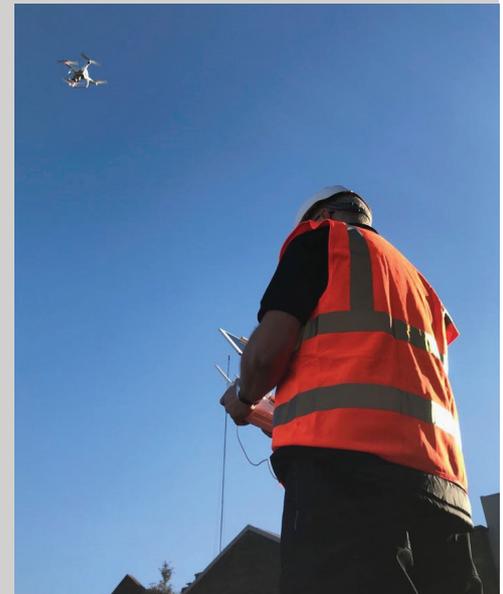
If you're not using drones for your roof surveys, whether for reactive/ad-hoc repairs, your planned maintenance, Decent Homes programmes or to assist with your EPC Clean Growth Strategy targets, then there are a whole range of benefits that you're probably missing out on.

- **Efficient use of time** – A routine inspection can be carried out by a drone in difficult to reach areas, and when a problem with a roof is apparent a drone can be used to quickly find the source of the issue. A drone survey doesn't need time spent erecting ladders, scaffolding or viewing platforms and it doesn't need any extra manpower so the process is completed faster than a traditional survey.
- **Reduced disruption** – A drone survey doesn't require activities within the property to cease; work can carry on as normal, so that disruption to your tenants is minimised.
- **Risk reduction** – Roof inspections and surveys, while not inherently dangerous, do carry some degree of risk. Some older buildings have very inaccessible roof areas, or areas which are tricky to examine with the human eye and can pose serious health and safety concerns for those carrying out the work. Drones allow for surveys, even in the most inaccessible areas, with little or no risk to human life.

- **Accurate results and records** – The nature of drone surveys means that the entire operation can be recorded from start to finish via high-resolution photographs, 4K HD video and thermal imaging. You can easily see areas of concern, issues with the roof, and review any earlier work that was done. Additionally, a drone survey can provide very accurate, quick and yet very impressive additional outputs such as precise measurements (photogrammetry) relating to perimeters, surface areas, edge counts, pitches and slope angles.

What are the other uses of drones in housing?

- **Medium & high-rise elevation inspections** – Images could easily be automatically captured of the elevations of any tall buildings to provide similar benefits to when used for inspecting roofs.
- **Development land inspections** – Another way in which drones could be used is for land inspections. Any land that has been earmarked as a possible development site could be inspected from the air and by using ground control points (geo-referenced precise points on the surface of the earth); extremely accurate measurements can be obtained which could greatly help architects and developers.
- **Solar-panel installations** – Fitted with a thermal camera, a drone can easily help to identify manufacturing defects, cracks, faulty inter-connectors, defective bypass diodes, temporary shadowing and the build-up of dirt which will all result in a reduction in the electricity generated.
- **Estate management and tenancy issues** – Addressing issues with fly tipping, untidy gardens, graffiti, abandoned vehicles, dirty communal areas, anti-social behaviour and parking could all benefit from an aerial view.
- **Void property marketing using 3D modelling** – 3D visualisations of



properties such as sheltered housing schemes can be created showing the property, its curtilage and surrounding areas. These can be easily embedded in your organisation's website or choice-based lettings site.

Who can fly a drone commercially and are they doing so legally?

More popularly known as drones, SUAs are now widely available for commercial use, but just like many other devices, they can cause injury or damage if they aren't used responsibly and so are subject to specific safety rules relating to the way they are operated, which are underpinned by UK law.

What is classed as flying commercially?

Any flight by an SUA which is in return for remuneration or other valuable consideration.

What qualification should the pilot have?

A pilot should have a Permission for Commercial Operation (PfCO). A PfCO is essentially a drone 'licence'. Licence is in inverted commas because it's not actually a licence, it's a permission. UK permissions are granted through undertaking a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) drone training course from a

DRONING ON IN HOUSING...

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CAA-approved trainer. The course will be followed by a practical and theory test. To obtain a PfCO, the pilot must then provide evidence of completing the course and exams to the CAA along with a comprehensive operations manual, which is effectively a contract between the pilot and the CAA outlining how the pilot intends to conduct flights safely. The PfCO allows a drone operator to use an SUA. The SUA must weigh less than 20kg and can be used for commercial projects.

Does the pilot need insurance?

Yes, the pilot requires very specific insurance that complies with Regulation (EC) 785/2004, as required by the CAA.

Can a pilot with a PfCO fly anywhere?

Absolutely not. There are a number of rules and regulations; these are the key ones which often get ignored (especially by hobbyists). Drones should:

- Always be flown within visual line of sight;
- Always be flown lower than 400ft (121m) and within 1640ft (500m);
- Be flown within the manufacturer's instructions; for example, if the maximum suggested wind speed is 10 m/s (22mph) then it should not be flown in winds exceeding that;
- Not be flown within 150ft (50m) of a person, vehicle, vessel or structure that's not under the control of the pilot;
- Stay at least 150ft (50m) away from built-up and congested areas and never fly over them unless under the control of the pilot;
- Never take off or land within 100ft (30m) of a person.

At first glance, those rules and regulations look quite onerous but with the correct pre-deployment operational planning and risk assessment, most 'missions' can be undertaken safely and successfully.

The future of the drone economy

PwC estimates that by 2030 drones will have contributed to a £42 billion increase in the UK's GDP and £16 billion of cost savings to the UK economy.

With ever increasing battery lives, advancements in sense-and-avoid technology and a legislative acceptance that regulation must adapt, there is no doubt that over the next few years the skies above us will become increasingly populated with these types of aircraft.

This is highlighted by the government backed 'Flying High Challenge', a collaborative engagement with five cities and regions across the UK trialling innovative ways to shape the future of drones and drone systems. Surveillance and security, chemical spraying, painting, search and rescue and deliveries are just some of the uses that are now being trialled.

Matthew Stinson is a director of Raven Drones.

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CASTLETON.DIGITAL LAUNCHED AS INTERACTIVE HOUSING PLATFORM

Castleton Technology has just launched its Castleton.Digital interactive platform, which the company says offers housing providers an infinitely flexible and configurable platform that can link every other existing system together, integrating any tenant data currently stored in separate application silos into a single, simple-to-use solution. Tenant information can then be used to deliver smarter communications, with a highly customisable and clearly-signposted journey tailored to individual circumstances.

Castleton.Digital is a self-build, self-service, subscription-based development platform that delivers total control to providers and easy access for tenants. The company's aim behind Castleton.Digital is to give housing providers the necessary tools to build their own bespoke systems to meet specific operational requirements and to support individual digital journeys.

Ian Niblock, director of development and product strategy, Castleton Technology, said, "We've found that with just two hours training, people have been able to build a completely functional app, that

pulls data from wherever it's stored and signposts the individual journey.

"This is cutting-edge technology. There is absolutely nothing like this in the social housing market right now. We have used Progressive Web Apps to create Castleton.Digital, which is a brand-new way to deliver an effective user experience on the web. Unlike apps that need to be downloaded from app stores, there is no installation required for Castleton.Digital; it loads quickly to mobile phones and delivers optimised screens."



James Massey,
Chief Operating
Officer, Castleton
Technology

James Massey, chief operating officer, Castleton Technology, said, "The younger generation coming into social housing expect native online interactions; they don't make phone calls or write letters and housing providers need to be switched on to this.

"Digitally-attentive providers offering great multi-modal service will find that their properties are more in demand, they will have shorter and fewer voids, and in some cases will be able to command higher rents.

"Tenants are becoming more digitally confident and our interactive development platform responds directly to this need. Castleton.Digital will allow housing providers to interact with these tenants efficiently and effectively, freeing up time and resources for tenants who need more intensive support."

Castleton.Digital works on all platforms and displays on all devices. The app can be downloaded instantly from a link, either via a website or from a text message sent by a tenant's housing provider.

Massey said, "Nobody else is offering anything like this in the social housing sector. It's a completely different take on the flat representations of data we're used to, offering greater functionality, flexibility and interactivity."



NDL STREAMLINES MORAY COUNCIL'S MOBILE SERVICES

Moray Council has centralised all of its customer services, including mobile housing repairs, to a single contact centre using NDL's awiMX and awiSX integration software.

After a review to find opportunities to simplify, standardise or share processes for service improvements and money saving, Moray Council wanted to remove multiple contact points for different services by centralising access via a single contact centre. To support this, the council implemented a Lagan CRM system and then looked at which service areas would benefit most from restructuring.

One area highlighted was the council's housing repairs service. Tenants previously called the housing service direct, with administrative staff then following a

manual, paper-based process to book repairs into a central iWorld housing system, but without any appointment- or work-scheduling system in place, this process involved a significant amount of administrative effort and resulted in large numbers of wasted visits due to no access.

Moray decided it needed to implement mobile working for its response repair operatives and then integrate this with its three back-office systems and the front-office Lagan CRM. To do this, it chose NDL's awi mobile and integration technology suite. awiMX is NDL's mobile application platform which enables back-office applications to be mobilised through rapid in-house development. awiSX is a flexible and versatile alternative for integration which avoids the need to use individual vendors' APIs or adaptors.

As a result of using NDL's software to enable mobile working, seven fewer operatives are now needed to carry out the council's repairs service.

Roy Poulsen, ICT project leader, Moray Council, said, "awiMX was an obvious route for us because it did exactly what we needed, and using awiSX as well provided a huge saving as we didn't have to invest in expensive and inflexible connectors between our core front- and back-office applications.

"I'm very impressed with awi as a platform for developing mobile apps, and for maintaining and monitoring mobile devices. We're now exploring other service areas where we can drive similar efficiencies to those achieved in housing repairs."



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COMMUNICATIONS FOR INNOVATION AND GROWTH

Charlotte Houston, Content Marketing Manager, Geomant
Steve Dungworth, Director of Digital Transformation, Accent Group

The terms 'digital transformation', 'customer experience' and 'user adoption' are hot topics in the housing sector at the moment, and for good reason given the rapidly changing landscape. It's pleasing to see that traditional ICT departments are now rebranding into digital teams working collaboratively with colleagues from housing and contact centres.

There's been a considerable shift towards putting the customer at the heart of services and adapting to meet tenants' changing needs. This will not only improve relationships but enable significant efficiencies to be made for any housing provider. However, in this connected age where tenants expect more from the services they consume, the challenge for housing providers is to re-evaluate their communications infrastructures in order to be agile and innovative. Before we move on to look at technology infrastructure and what housing providers can do to ensure a solid foundation for future growth, let's remember what's driving the changing demands:

- Housing providers' tenants are no different from the rest of the UK population with 82 per cent of all UK adults using the internet daily. However, housing providers are also committed to providing services for all, including those digitally excluded.
- Similarly, tenants' expectations of services via the internet and apps on their phones have increased in line with their use of online consumer services.
- While telephone/voice remains the most popular channel, email, web chat and social media are fast becoming the channels of choice.

A look back at housing technology infrastructure

A report by Incom Business Systems detailed four key challenges facing the housing sector, technology infrastructure being one. For many years, housing providers have functioned using familiar and unchanging business processes



and systems. Business applications have either been bought and adapted in-house or have been developed using internal resources to fit business needs.

The result has been disparate systems and applications being used independently within the organisation. The main takeaway from this is that housing providers face considerable legacy system issues, with an array of mutually-exclusive systems in place. This affects productivity as there could be challenges around collaboration and integration impacting on front-line staff who will find it hard to deal with tenants' enquiries effectively.

Taking into account all of these factors – the changing demands of tenants, a legacy issue of disparate systems and limited collaboration within the sector – we come back to the question: how can housing providers create a communications environment that will enable innovation and growth?

At Geomant, we believe a flexible unified communication (UC) solution is the answer. UC acts as a core pillar, enabling omni-channel interaction – tenants can engage with their provider via the web, phone, email, SMS, chat or social media. They can also switch between channels without their journey or conversation flow being interrupted.

The reason we emphasised 'flexible' above is that you'll want to choose a UC system that not only has the ability to connect with your existing contact

centre and telephony functionality but you'll also want to ensure that it is flexible enough to connect with other business applications such as CRM or housing management in order to bridge the gap between any disparate systems.

Let's take a look at an example of a housing provider that's leading the way in preparing for future growth and laying the foundations that will allow them to keep up with tenant demands and the changing environment.

Accent Housing



Accent owns and manages over 21,000 properties in five regions across the UK. We have a

40-seat contact centre in Shipley which receives around a quarter of a million telephone calls from tenants every year. For every incoming call, one outbound call is generated (on average), making a total of half a million calls per year. 80 per cent of calls are about either repairs or rents.

In February 2018, we launched our Accent Connect programme, a powerful, omni-channel contact centre solution (powered by Geomant) that enhances services to tenants while improving the working environment for our staff and providing the Accent management team with rich, real-time information for strategic decision-making and good governance.

COMMUNICATIONS FOR INNOVATION AND GROWTH

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In summary, Accent Connect is a single integrated communications platform that encapsulates voice, email, web chat, social media and video conferencing. Customer interactions have SLAs and are automatically routed to contact advisers according to their skillset. As with many of the new breed of technology solutions, Connect is easy to administer from within the contact centre (such as changing queues, recording messages and emergency mode), rather than having to rely on help from ICT support, so making it 'agile' to manage.

Accent's traditional voice channel has been enhanced, providing customers with the ability to request a call back rather than queuing to speak to an agent. Staff are provided with 'screen-popping', so the system automatically finds the customer's CRM record before the call/email is answered. It allows the agent to consult CRM before answering the call so they are better prepared, saving time and impressing the customer with how their information is immediately available at the fingertips of staff.

Connect is integrated with our housing management system, MIS ActiveH, and will push the content of emails and web chats into ActiveH so that all staff have a full, real-time 360-degree view of the contact with customers. Another reason staff love the system is that they now complete one task at a time rather than having to manage multiple calls and

emails simultaneously. Contact advisers can also seamlessly allow housing officers, surveyors and contractors to join the customer on the call.

The management information produced by Connect is excellent and is starting to be used to allow Accent to know, understand and segment our customers better, as well as manage the contact centre far more responsively. Importantly, this intelligence is used for strategic decision making, providing our executive team and board with the information required for good governance.

Outgoing campaigns have been created to use the quieter times of advisers to contact customers about their levels of rent arrears or whether they need help with universal credit. More resources have been deployed during evenings and weekends to enhance email as an equally accessible channel of communication.

Contact advisers can now resolve more customer enquiries at first point of contact by having information immediately available and by connecting customers to agents with the right specialist skillset, regardless of where they are.

The wider benefits of the project include:

- Mobile and flexible working has been embraced. There is less need for staff to travel to attend meetings because video conferencing is available and encouraged using Skype4Business.

- Accent staff share their 'presence' with all colleagues so allowing staff to decide whether to make contact with each other without having to actually try.
- There is an instant messaging facility between one or more people and the ability to share and collaborate on documents.
- At the push of a button, other staff and external contacts (such as contractors) can now be pulled into conference calls as needed.

Accent Connect has been a great success and is having a very positive impact on customer perception, staff efficiency and the working environment. The solution allows for easy integration so if we need to integrate other functions to keep up with changing demands, it can be done easily.

Conclusion

A massive opportunity exists for housing providers to take advantage of new and innovative products to support and improve service delivery. The key takeaway from this article is to have a core structure in place first to allow this to happen in the most efficient and cost-effective way.

Steve Dungworth is director of digital transformation at Accent Group. Charlotte Houston is the content marketing manager at Geomant.

Hyperoptic hits housing milestone

Hyperoptic said that it delivers the UK's fastest broadband speeds of up to 1Gbps (1,000 megabits per second), over 21 times faster than the UK average. It supplies a number of housing providers, including A2Dominion, Hyde Group, Catalyst, Genesis Housing and Notting Hill Housing Trust. It also works with 50 UK councils across the UK, supplying high-speed broadband connectivity to their social housing stock.

Floyd Widener, chief sales officer, Hyperoptic, said, "For too long, 'digital inclusion' has been a buzzword that broadband providers have bandied about to secure grants and funding but



Floyd Widener,
Chief Sales Officer,
Hyperoptic

that's not the case with us. Working with housing providers is a strategic priority for us, which is why we're squarely focused on getting tenants successfully connected. The provision of our full-fibre service is just one part of the equation – we also offer digital skills training and flexible products, such as rolling contracts and a low-price broadband-only service."

Steven Waite, director of technical and commercial services, A2Dominion, said, "We recognise the important role that fast, reliable broadband services can play in getting tenants online. However, in the past we've had very little control over what broadband services our tenants could get – it was a broadband postcode lottery, depending on the existing broadband infrastructure at each site. Thanks to our collaboration with Hyperoptic, thousands of our properties are now enabled with its gigabit connectivity."



USING TECHNOLOGY FOR A MORE PERSONAL APPROACH

Ewan MacLarty, Development Director, Northgate Public Services

Northgate Public Services' development director, Ewan MacLarty, says it's time to focus on creating more face-to-face and personalised contact with tenants.

A one-size-fits-all approach to housing is in danger of failing tenants as highlighted in a recent report by Shelter. The report revealed that as many as 48 per cent of families in social housing felt ignored or were refused help when reporting issues about poor or unsafe conditions. The Grenfell tragedy has further underlined the importance of not shutting the door on tenants' concerns.

Truly successful tenant engagement is a two-way process. It's as much about listening as talking. But in an era of austerity and with greater demands being placed on social housing providers, how easy is it to achieve, and is it possible to adopt a personal approach to create more time for tenants? I think it is – here's how.

'Hand's on' when it matters most

Giving more time for staff to listen to tenants' concerns doesn't have to be consigned to a wish list, despite staff and budgets already being stretched.

Automating essential routine administrative tasks frees staff to identify those who would benefit from a more 'hands on' approach. It enables front-line staff to have the flexibility needed to take on the more challenging cases, where the solution to the tenants' issues might require a multi-agency response.

Considering the wider context too, cuts to other front-line services, such as health, have seen housing staff increasingly having to fill the gaps. Housing officers are now sometimes providing a wider welfare role to some of the most vulnerable, marginalised and poorest sections of our communities. For example, it's been a few months since the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force and housing providers are playing a vital role in ensuring those entitled to housing are not slipping through the net. More efficient system processing allows

for human intervention and interaction where it's needed. For many of those living on the streets, coming into an office to make a housing application is a step too far. Automating the more mundane tasks means staff can take a proactive approach to meeting their obligations under the act and get out from behind their desks and help.

A blanket approach isn't the solution

Not all tenants need the same level of support. So how do you identify those needing a more personalised housing management plan? Having access to customer insights is the key.

Consider a housing officer faced with a tenant in receipt of universal credit who is falling behind with their rental payments. Taken at face value and without access to any other data, reminder letters or chaser emails could be sent out. The result? The situation would probably continue, yet no one would necessarily know why.

Instead, after analysing the data a trend is spotted; the tenant has a history of always paying two weeks late. A phone call or visit could reveal that the tenant doesn't get paid until two weeks after their rent day and a renegotiation of rental dates could be agreed. The reminders no longer need to be generated and the housing officer can consider other cases.

Successful housing management is about people. It's about creating a dialogue. Data analysis allows for a conversation to start. It helps providers deliver a targeted approach better suited to the individual tenant's needs and prevents a destructive cycle of rent arrears from happening. It helps housing officers support tenants and sustain tenancies.

Face-to-face

Many tenants have difficult back-stories. For these people, face-to-face contact can help break down barriers and build a relationship built on trust and cooperation. For some, picking up the phone to a housing officer or writing an

email to express their concerns or give voice to their needs is simply not an option they would choose. This makes them harder to reach and more difficult to assess and help. For these tenants, a visit to their home can be the answer, and enabling staff to work remotely will go a long way in achieving this.

For example, consider a victim of domestic abuse who might be fearful of leaving a property but who needs to talk about rehousing and rent arrears. A visit to the home by the housing officer, who can directly and securely access the tenant's personal data and rental history via their tablet device, provides an opportunity to offer more tailored support.

The ability to then complete a form while with the tenant to access partner services (such as a women's support group) will deliver a response that is very likely to have an impact on the tenant in the long term.

Using mobile technology to release housing officers from being tied to their desks, to interact face-to-face with tenants and listen to their concerns has tangible benefits for both landlord and tenant.

Housing staff can see at first-hand some of the problems facing tenants, such as the impact of anti-social behaviour on the community, and suggest a change of approach, like a resident involvement panel. More meaningful involvement can lead to both increased tenant satisfaction and engagement and greater job satisfaction for staff.

Shared responsibility

Creating a sense of shared responsibility by using predictive technology to inform and involve tenants in the running and maintenance of their homes will reap dividends in the future. Currently, a significant amount of money is ploughed back into maintenance and property repairs, instead of building new homes or creating better communal spaces.

USING TECHNOLOGY FOR A MORE PERSONAL APPROACH

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Take the issue of damp. Installing damp sensors in the roof enables early identification of damp problems and tenants can be given appropriate advice to air the property and future proof against it. Or the data collected could also show that a problem is occurring in a specific block, enabling remedial work to be undertaken before things get too costly or become a health hazard.

Giving tenants greater control by flagging and tracking their repair needs online not only encourages a shared sense of responsibility but it also lends a greater transparency to the process, thereby improving the relationship between tenant and housing provider.

One size doesn't fit all

The right technology supports housing providers' focus on the individual and

enables a more holistic approach to tenant welfare, ultimately creating more sustainable tenancies. If we want to create a social housing system fit for the future, we need to put tenants at the heart of it. I believe building closer and more meaningful relationships between tenant and landlord is the answer.

Ewan MacLarty is the development director at Northgate Public Services.



AAREON'S VIEW OF HOUSING TRENDS

Ian Lockwood, Head of Business Development, Aareon

In the lead up to Housing Technology's 2019 conference and executive forum (see page 43), Aareon's head of business development, Ian Lockwood, discussed some of the conference's main themes and how they affect housing providers' technology plans.

Going back to basics, how should housing providers use their 'traditional' IT applications and infrastructure better and more innovatively?

IT systems have now evolved so far beyond their original brief that the definitions of 'traditional' or 'back to basics' themselves have changed. While the deployment of housing management systems is a great deal more sophisticated now, I would argue that the only effective way to get the very best out of them is through high-quality, real-time integration.

For example, Aareon has invested heavily in seamless integrated systems that enable housing providers' front-line staff, management and tenants to access all the key information they need online in real-time whenever they want. This enables cross-functional support, so that housing staff can deal with a wide range of tenant issues, from rents, ASB, maintenance, care or estate issues, not just those within their immediate silo.

How are housing providers using IT in original, innovative and counter-intuitive ways?

While the original housing systems were 'B2B'-focused for use by housing providers' own staff, the current self-service app and portal revolution will demand slick, consumer-friendly 'B2C' interfaces. These will increase digital inclusion and value-for-money while keeping housing providers' costs down.

This juxtaposition of the corporate and consumer worlds requires a whole new investment in top-class systems and only those vendors with the resources to fund such development will succeed. Aareon has been and continues to invest in this approach – we predict that the customer interface for self-service housing systems will be transformed into a polished, proven and expanding set of self-service tools.

What IT & business ideas have housing providers copied or used from beyond the housing sector?

The use of technologies in the online consumer and B2C sectors is a useful guide to what might filter through to social housing. This follows a trend, as the housing sector has already incorporated smarter technologies such

as IoT, digital-by-default, frictionless computing, machine learning and big data. However, with the introduction of self-service tenant portals, apps and 360-degree dashboards there is a need to borrow even more intensively from the consumer side, so that accessing your housing, maintenance, care or community data should be as simple and friendly as accessing a programme on, say, Netflix. This high-quality usability is an area where Aareon is investing heavily to develop an extremely user-friendly customer interface.

How can housing providers avoid yet more 'data silos'?

There are so many innovative applications that are attractive to housing providers, but it's vital to ensure that we don't create yet more silos of data stored within niche, stand-alone solutions. Integration with housing providers' core HMS/ERP solutions is critical, so thought must be given to the availability of integration tools such as APIs.

Ian Lockwood is head of business development at Aareon.



IS TEXT MESSAGING RIGHT FOR YOU?

Eric Lau, Sales & Marketing Executive, OmniLedger

Ofcom reported in 2017 that 94 per cent of adults in the UK now own or use a mobile phone. Text messaging therefore presents housing providers with a powerful tool to improve the quality of their communications with tenants. OmniLedger's sales and marketing executive, Eric Lau, explores the implications involved with adopting intelligent text messaging for social housing.

The first thing to note is that there are lots of SMS solutions available and they come with varying levels of integration services. We have found that the following features are most relevant for housing providers:

Digital communications manager

This will form the core of your text messaging solution. The digital communications manager will include all the core features of your SMS service, enabling you to: manage your database of tenant and supplier contacts (i.e. the participants); save pre-prepared standard text messages; schedule text messages to be sent to a particular group of participants in bulk; and write and send ad-hoc text messages to a particular group of contacts in bulk.

Two-way communications

With two-way communications, you'll be able to send and receive text messages, enabling tenants to communicate with you in an automated and intelligent manner. This will let you provide a wide variety of automated 24/7 text-messaging services through the use of workflows designed to your specific requirements.

SMS workflow designer

While the core principles of social housing are similar, the execution varies from organisation to organisation. With a workflow designer, you'll be able to create a variety of automated services developed specifically for your requirements, such as: a tenant rent balance enquiry; request rent payment bank details; tenant satisfaction surveys; report a repair; and log a communication request with a tenant's housing officer.

Audit trail

An audit trail that can't be modified by users will provide your organisation with proof that messages were sent and received by the recipient. This enables you to incorporate text messaging as part of your arrears policy and submit the log as recognised legal evidence.

HMS integration

Your housing management system should already contain all of your tenants and suppliers' contact details. By integrating your text messaging services and housing management system, the data can be maintained in one location; ensuring consistency and eliminating the need to duplicate input.

Integration also provides opportunities for enhanced services, such as: allowing tenants to reschedule appointments; allowing suppliers to update, cancel or complete a repair order; automatic arrears notifications; automatic benefits entitlement change notifications; and updates about rent changes.

Reducing annual overheads

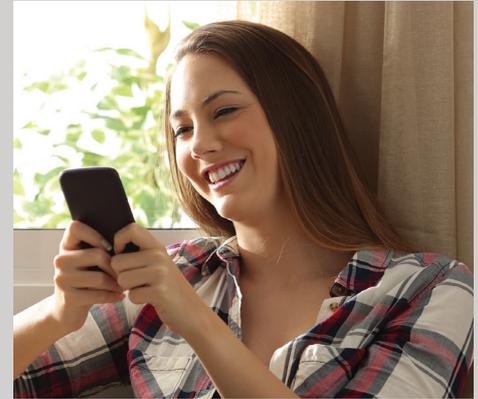
Adopting a two-way, intelligent text messaging service with a variety of automated features gives housing providers a platform to reduce their overheads through efficiency savings. This is achieved by replacing traditional media with a cheaper, faster text alternative.

The total cost of sending a letter to a tenant can cost between £2 and £25, taking into consideration all of the elements involved in sending a letter (labour, postage, printing, materials, etc). By contrast, the cost of sending a text message can be as little as 8p per text.

Improving KPIs

A report published by Textlocal found that 90 per cent of text messages will be read within three minutes and 98 per cent by the end of the day. Alternatively, a letter would take up to three days to arrive and even then may not be opened by the recipient.

By taking advantage of the high readability rate of text messages, housing



providers can improve their KPIs in areas such as rent arrears, repair appointments kept, average time to re-let (reduced voids) and satisfaction with repairs.

Best practices & things to be aware of

Based on our previous experience, OmniLedger would suggest the following advice and best practice recommendations:

- Before even considering an SMS solution at all, at least 60 per cent of your tenants should have a mobile number recorded against their file. If you have fewer than that then you'll need to perform a data-gathering exercise with your tenants first.
- Include SMS within your tenancy agreement to your tenants and encourage them to consent to you holding their mobile number on file.
- Include a welcome package to your tenants as part of the launch of your SMS service.
- Include an automated text service so that tenants can update their number or subscribe to the service.
- Keep your messages relevant to your tenants to maintain positive engagement; not doing so will lose the attention of your audience.
- Plan and control your text message usage to ensure you remain within budget.
- Timing is important – noon to 3pm is the most effective time to send a text message. This will vary depending on the type of message, so it's important to monitor response rates to ascertain when your tenants are most receptive to texts.

Text messaging is still on the rise and has emerged as one of the most reliable

IS TEXT MESSAGING RIGHT FOR YOU?

Continued from previous page

communication methods. By adopting text message services, housing providers can promote digital inclusion, reduce overheads and improve KPIs. However, success is dependent on the adoption of

best practices to promote engagement with your tenants, keeping the content relevant for them and nurturing your audience.

Eric Lau is a sales & marketing executive at OmniLedger.



AN ASSET MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE VFM STANDARD

Rowley Maggs, Director, SDS

The regulator's updated Value for Money (VfM) standard came into effect from April 2018. The standard aims to drive improvements in value-for-money in the sector and, more importantly, be incorporated into the strategic objectives which are measured in your business.

The regulator's Sector Risk Profile 2018 (published in October 2018) has also reinforced the importance of the new VfM standard, and the regulator will be looking for organisations to have evidence that they are getting to grips with these new requirements through its programme of in-depth assessments (IDA).

From an asset manager's perspective, it's worth noting the following points taken from the VfM standard and code of practice. An active approach to asset management can help you address and embed these points in your strategic approach and service delivery model:

1. You must ensure that optimal benefit is derived from resources and assets. You must optimise economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of your strategic objectives.

By understanding the actual financial performance of your assets using modern modelling techniques, such as measuring net present value (NPV), you will be able to examine the opportunity cost of using the assets and resources in their current function in terms of their worth to your organisation.

2. You must demonstrate a robust approach to achieving value-for-money – this must include demonstrating an

effective decision-making process, and a rigorous appraisal of potential options for improving performance.

By using asset performance to set a policy decision framework, supported by a property option appraisal process, several key policy options can be applied to poor performing properties. These are: do nothing (see point 3); invest, change tenure, transfer to a better-placed provider; or dispose on the open market. This will allow you to compare these alternative options and demonstrate VfM decisions.

3. You may at times opt not to receive maximum return from an asset, instead taking the decision to accept a lower return in furtherance of your social objectives – the rationale for this decision should be clearly articulated and justified.

By modelling the NPV performance of your assets, you will be able to understand your best and worst performers and apply policy options to improve performance, but importantly demonstrate those circumstances where your business is happy to retain assets with lower financial performance, because it is more important to your organisation to retain affordable homes in a specific location or where covenants and other restrictions would make it difficult to realise the estimated market value.

4. You must also be able to demonstrate that you have a full understanding of the net return generated from your assets, and show how this return varies across your asset base.

By measuring the financial performance of your assets using NPV modelling, you will be able to compare and report performance across your property portfolio against your business archetypes, including property type, tenure, and geographical location. When comparing the NPV of these different assets, such as a house, flat or bedsit, you will be able to demonstrate which asset type is more valuable in financial terms across your property portfolio. NPV modelling will allow you to understand the impact of current day-to-day maintenance costs and future major repair investments on a financial return by each asset.

In summary, creating a well-developed asset management strategy is essential, supported by well-defined policies, working methods, clear performance measures and a strong focus on value-for-money in property appraisals, contract procurement and management.

SDS recommend that housing providers create a baseline position statement of the financial performance of your assets using NPV modelling. The results should be reported back to the business, senior management team and board to both inform and determine future business planning priorities. This will help your organisation to create the right approach to active asset management, and create measures to demonstrate how you obtain the maximum return from your assets, evidencing you have the VfM standard gripped!

Rowley Maggs is a director of SDS.



ASSET MANAGEMENT FOR SMALLER RSLs

Ruth Dent, Asset Management Consultant, PIMSS Data Systems

If you're an asset manager, you're probably consistently having to do more and with less, just like many of your colleagues in other areas of your operations. The situation is compounded further in smaller housing providers where every member of your team has to 'wear a different hat' every day and juggle different responsibilities – one moment you're a strategist, planner, administrator or customer service expert, the next moment you need to be a surveyor, void inspector, stock condition data collector or contract manager.

While an asset management system won't necessarily stop you needing to juggle responsibilities, it will at least deliver plenty of benefits that make the investment worthwhile for a smaller housing provider.

Future proofing

It's inevitable that staff will leave and the new people coming into the organisation will work differently. While still a headache for larger housing providers, staff turnover within smaller housing providers is felt much more acutely, with the loss of headcount and working knowledge simultaneously affecting multiple disciplines.

The one aspect that must remain consistent and safeguarded is your data. Data is the only thing you can solidly depend on through operational change, and if looked after correctly can leave an incredibly positive legacy for your organisation. So don't wait until your spreadsheet falls over, move it into a central, auditable and reliable asset management system so you can manage it properly and accurately. Investment in IT is vital to ensure seamless working between asset management and the rest of the business and where the core objective is sustainable assets and happy tenants then access to reliable information is of the utmost importance.

Legislative & regulatory duties

There has never been a greater

emphasis on compliance, and a robust set of data is what will help you sleep at night. I speak from experience when I say that asset managers working with smaller numbers of housing stock will undoubtedly know their assets inside out. But can you demonstrate to the auditor or regulator that this particular block doesn't have a communal area, or that these 50 assets don't have a gas supply? Holding everything in a central asset management system improves the integrity of your data and by reducing your reliance on spreadsheets, it decreases the chance of the errors that can occur when the same document is edited by numerous people.

Doing more for less

Long-term contracts aren't just for the big housing providers! Nothing drives contractor pricing down like a full order book and an asset management system will enable you to effectively and accurately plan your investment for the next 3-5 years, so you can guarantee your contractor work. Longer term contracts can provide smaller organisations with cost certainty and a contractor commitment that can often be lacking on smaller works. Plus internally, there should be fewer resources needed to service contracts or manage repeat tenders, freeing up your team to be more productive.

Ease of reporting

Every housing provider is, and should be, scrutinised. The ability to produce accurate and reliable reports from a 'single version of the truth' with just a few mouse clicks is invaluable. System-generated KPIs reduce the likelihood of examination and take less time to produce compared with spreadsheet- or paper-based practices. The ability to accurately predict your planned spending will give you the ability to deliver an accurate and reliable business plan, which can be stress tested and stand up to the most arduous examination. With the potential for league tables just around

the corner, being able to demonstrate excellent performance is likely to be a key differentiator, even among smaller housing providers.

System flexibility

Due to their size and nimbleness, innovative working is a big part of the success of smaller housing providers. To that end, asset management systems can often be extended far beyond just the management of your property assets. For example, mobile devices can be integrated to capture and report on any survey, so why not also use them to record tenant satisfaction, safeguarding, operative risk assessments, snagging or works sign-off? Those are just some of the many alternative uses for an asset management system that can automate cumbersome, time-consuming and unrewarding paper-based tasks, ultimately leading to better staff productivity and operational performance.

Document management

Asset management systems will let you store all of your files against the appropriate assets and eradicate the prospect of someone accidentally moving or deleting important data or records. This data store makes everything clear and accessible to everyone across the organisation and ensures a visible and robust audit trail.

This document management discipline also enables housing providers to meet their regulatory obligations regarding document and record retention. It also means that new staff only have to familiarise themselves with one, rather than multiple systems or file structures.

Collaboration

There are huge efficiencies and advantages to collating all data in one place, and in doing so an asset management system gives a clear 360-degree view of what is happening with your assets. This data can be accessed by anyone with the right privileges thus providing reassurance

ASSET MANAGEMENT FOR SMALLER RSLs

Continued from previous page

to your executives and board that records are accurate, up-to-date and will withstand regulatory scrutiny.

The housing sector continues to undergo rapid change, including further asset management scrutiny in future. There are many benefits to implementing an

asset management system, none more so than giving smaller housing providers a vital tool to be able to transparently demonstrate all the hard and excellent work they're doing.

So now the question should be can you afford not to implement an asset

management system to transform your organisation to manage future challenges?

Ruth Dent is an asset management consultant at PIMSS Data Systems.



GUILDFORD
BOROUGH

Guildford Council selects Mobysoft's RentSense

Guildford Council has bought Mobysoft's RentSense to help mitigate the projected impact of universal credit.

Siobhan Rumble, landlord services manager, Guildford Borough Council, said, "Our [annualised] collection rate is 100.02%, but with the introduction of universal credit on the horizon, we can't afford to stand still. We know that our income officers' workloads will increase and we want to maximise how we use the resources that we already have. We have invested in RentSense to streamline the current workload, allowing improved efficiencies and maximising our income collection.

"We found there is no comparable software to RentSense in the social housing sector that offers payment profiling and predictive analytics technology. The software is also already being used successfully by other housing providers who are using the same housing management system as us."

Paul Evans, commercial director, Mobysoft, said, "RentSense processes

around 25 per cent of all social tenancies in the UK each week. The software also identifies any new payment patterns or trends associated with the introduction of full-service universal credit, which we then build into the algorithms. The software evolves with the environment and continues to be highly accurate in its recommendations regarding which cases need further investigation, thus helping housing providers deal better with universal credit."



Mobysoft expands its account management team

Mobysoft has appointed Rachel Collings as an account director and Jonathan Maplesden as an account manager to help support its housing customers.



Collings has over 20 years' experience of working in

social housing, including local authority services, voluntary sector positions and

various social policy and performance improvement projects. In addition, she has had relationship management roles at the Northern Housing Consortium and most recently HouseMark.

Maplesden has over 15 years' public sector experience, many of which have been involved with social housing, having worked for Bury Metropolitan Borough Council, Capita and most recently Castleton Technology.

Paul Evans, commercial director, Mobysoft, said, "It's great to have Rachel and Jonathan joining the business. They both bring a huge amount of knowledge and experience of housing and will be a great asset to Mobysoft and our customers. These positions complement our existing client success managers so we can support our housing customers at operational, management and director levels."

PLACES FOR PEOPLE'S TENDERING SOFTWARE FROM PROACTIS

Places for People has optimised its 'source-to-pay' process with Proactis, with the aim of improving transparency and due diligence across the group's tendering processes, achieve compliance with European directives for tendering and a gain a single, unilateral view of all contract documents and supply-chain partners.

Places for People publishes 30-40 large formal tenders each year, with smaller, less complex tenders published using Proactis Quick Quote functionality. With Proactis Sourcing, all tendering documentation is now held centrally, providing a

complete audit trail of the whole process and ensures that the group complies with European rules and regulations (e.g. bids can't be viewed until the deadline has passed).

Places for People uses the supplier portal within Proactis Contract Management to work with its Unit4 Business World On! ERP system to capture all supplier requirements, in terms of insurance levels and accreditations. Instead of having to verify every response to every question, the entire process is reduced in terms of time scale, and provides an audit trail as all information is captured and can be shared.



A DAY IN THE LIFE... PROCUREMENT FOR HOUSING

Phil Moss, Chief Technology Officer, Procurement for Housing

I'm more of an early morning person, so my day starts around 6am when I make a quick coffee and leave my home in Lancashire. Depending on my schedule, I'll either turn left and drive to our office in Manchester where our software development team is based – they are the 'techies' working on the software behind our procurement frameworks. But if I'm meeting the people who use our technology – Pfh's sales team and account managers – then I turn right and head to our main office in Warrington.

Where ever I am, everything stops at 10.30am. The technology team (that's six of us) takes part in a daily 'scrum' call where everyone across all of our sites answers three questions: we want to know what they did yesterday; what their plans are for today; and what blockers they're facing. Today's scrum focused on automating categorisation and how we can ensure that lowest-level transactional data is routinely classified to detect if a member is spending too much on a certain product.

As the largest spend aggregator in the UK social housing sector, Pfh collects a lot of this transactional data. We manage over a million invoices a year – that's £250 million of spending. Our aim is to use this unique position to provide housing-specific insights to landlords. Technology, in particular machine learning, is a key part of achieving this.

Machine learning is a type of artificial intelligence. AI uses computer programmes to think and learn like humans and machine learning is one of those programmes. It's all about identifying patterns in historical data – algorithms learn those patterns and then forecast future trends.

Historically, the housing sector hasn't been great at managing data or categorising products – and this has led to a delay in the adoption of AI and smart analytics. There is very little granular detail in the sector, so it's been hard to introduce machine learning for predictive analysis, or to compare spending data with public data sets to see if a housing provider is paying too much for, for example, kitchen refurbishments.

The scrum meeting today focused on tackling this problem. Since I began at Pfh around a year ago, I've used technology to put data at the heart of everything we do. Every single line of pricing, transactional and CRM information goes into our data warehouse where it is used for analysis and reporting. On a monthly basis, this data warehouse examines 300,000 lines of spending data from more than 900 housing providers.

For the last six months, our team has been refining the quality of this data and developing technologies, bespoke to the social housing sector, which we can use to categorise information and provide members with intuition around their procurement spending.

This data analysis was taken to a new level when Pfh bought Valueworks. The system was specially designed for the social housing sector and it provides a collaborative, real-time view across all spending data so that housing



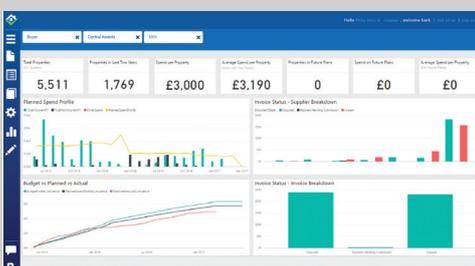
providers can more effectively track prices, control costs and improve quality. The software enables us to group our members' transactional data into specific programmes of work and then identify whether they are spending too much on certain products compared with their peers, whether they are purchasing several types of one product unnecessarily or whether there are better value alternatives available.

After today's scrum meeting, I meet with Pfh's six-strong account management team who liaise directly with our members on a day-to-day basis.

One of the digital initiatives we've introduced recently is VFM reporting. This analytics service gives members insight into their spending over a particular period, highlighting saving opportunities.

Reports are created using data dissected by our Microsoft PowerBI software and account managers present the reports to members. I'm meeting the team to take them through the latest capabilities of the system.

Today, we talk about how the reports can tackle 'product drift', when an organisation spends less on the core products that Pfh has negotiated reduced rates for, leading to larger bills. I also explained that Vfm reports can pinpoint patterns such as a member that is spending more on a particular product compared with its expenditure last year.



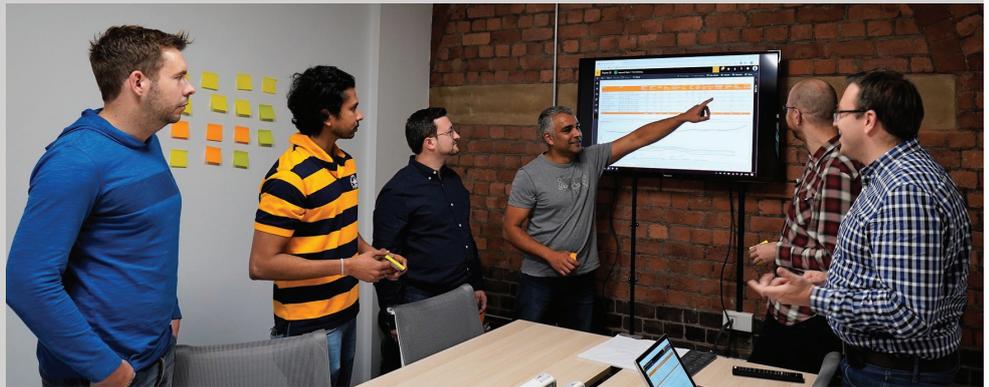
A DAY IN THE LIFE... PROCUREMENT FOR HOUSING

Continued from previous page

After lunch at my desk, I rush across the M62 to a meeting at Liverpool University's School of Electrical Engineering, Electronics and Computer Science. PfH runs a knowledge transfer partnership (KTP) with the university to explore how machine learning can help housing providers' procurement activities and I'm meeting our KTP associate, Dr David Hamilton.

KTPs help businesses like PfH to innovate by linking them with research organisations like Liverpool University. They enable companies to bring in the latest skills (David has a PhD in distributed algorithms and machine learning is his specialist area) to deliver a specific, strategic innovation project.

For us, that innovation project is showing housing providers the potential of their data and helping them to manage and use it in the right way. Our KTP is coming to an end and today I'm speaking to David about the next steps, particularly around using predictive analysis to learn from asset management invoice data and how we can link this data to price indices to show housing providers the best time to buy certain products.



Back in Warrington, I meet Steve Malone, PfH's managing director. We are discussing the latest smart procurement technologies to use with our members.

Data from technologies such as IoT thermostats, window sensors or smart boiler parts is already recognising 'failure in advance' and this could help housing providers switch from reactive repairs to planned maintenance. Machine learning could be used to recommend comparison products, such as a boiler that is cheaper, has a longer warranty and a smaller carbon footprint. Housing providers could also use 'emotional AI' to analyse social media mentions about

suppliers and combine this with data on contract performance, legal disputes or redundancies to build risk profiles.

My day finishes around 5.30pm when I head home. If there is enough daylight remaining, I might jump on the bike and enjoy the Lancashire countryside before an early night. In reality, I probably spend much of the evening negotiating with my two children to convince them it's bedtime!

Phil Moss is the chief technology officer for Procurement for Housing.

ENERGY ANGELS SAVES £25M FOR HOUSING PROVIDERS & TENANTS

Against a background of rising energy prices and a shortage of housing, void specialists Energy Angels has reported that it has saved housing providers and their tenants more than £25 million, boosted housing stock availability and helped to tackle fuel poverty.

Since its launch 12 years ago, the Wolverhampton-based company has partnered with numerous housing providers to provide its free and innovative service to bring empty properties back into use, with some 140,000 properties now having been made available for occupancy quickly and efficiently.



Energy Angels works to reduce the time that a property is not delivering rental income for landlords while also providing support and advice on energy usage for tenants and an online switching

service which has saved thousands of households an estimated £300 per year.

Lewis Taylor, founder and managing director, Energy Angels, said, "Tackling homelessness and fuel poverty are the key drivers behind Energy Angels. With housing demand constantly outstripping supply, it's vital to get voids turned around and available for new tenants as quickly as possible. This not only protects housing providers' rental income but it also provides much needed homes for families.

"When we started 12 years ago, there were only a handful of energy suppliers in the UK and although the 'big six' continue to dominate the market, the growth in independent energy suppliers means that there is now a much wider choice for tenants. While a wider choice can sometimes cause confusion, especially for vulnerable households, Energy Angels helps to simplify the energy switching process for families from the day they move in and throughout their tenancies."



ForViva gets active with Orchard's Options Appraisals

ForViva has extended its 10-year usage of Orchard's Asset Management software with its recent additional implementation of Orchard's Options Appraisal to get a better view of its housing assets.

Orchard said that as a module within Orchard Asset Management, Options Appraisal is an active asset management tool, enabling a more strategic view of asset management and provides stock viability assessments.

ForViva can now make informed and transparent decisions regarding the sustainability of its housing stock, including future spend, redevelopment or disposal for single dwellings up to entire estates or areas.

David Lowe, asset manager, ForViva, said, "Having considered other products, we chose Options Appraisal because it's the only solution on the market that is automated; the competitive products still use static loads into Excel spreadsheets and aren't fluid in terms of completed schemes or packages of work, plus no other offers any capability for scenario modelling."

Options Appraisal enables ForViva to bring in data direct from the survey module, with the survey data itself updated automatically once work on a location in a project is marked as complete. In addition, as work is completed on a project, the new information about ForViva's stock is immediately available for NPV calculations.

Lowe said, "Before using Orchard Asset Management, our data was held in our housing system and in various spreadsheets which made dealing with compliance, decent homes calculations and asbestos time-consuming and cumbersome. As with the other modules in Orchard Asset Management, Options Appraisal has not only saved us time and effort but has also given us the ability to assess stock performance and analyse the reasons for any poor performance, all from the same master set of data."

Options Appraisal has also provided support for financial stress testing and allows ForViva to take an intelligence-led approach to its stock investments, including helping it to decide if a project

is worthwhile before sending anything out to tender.

John Buckland, head of asset management, Orchard, said, "We understand the importance of having a single version of the truth and our integrated asset management system ensures this across all modules, including Options Appraisals. A robust system is needed when analysing thousands of properties with multiple factors across many years, with different scenarios, and stress-testing assumptions for factors such as interest rates and inflation."

Extending its initial use of Options Appraisal, ForViva now incorporates additional factors such as turnover, let-ability, crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) into its appraisals, giving it a more holistic view of how its housing stock is performing and then using those ratings to fine-tune their property investments.

HUB ASSET MANAGEMENT WINS NEW CUSTOMERS

Hub Asset Management has reported that it signed up four new customers during the latter part of 2018.

Bellsmyre Housing, Molendinar Park Housing, Ruchazie Housing and Thistle Housing will now be using Hub's software to oversee their asset management and SHQS/ESSH compliance processes. With the addition of these four new customers, 33,000 properties are now being managed using Hub, including 10 per cent of all RSLs in Scotland.

Graeme Reid, director, Hub Asset Management, said, "Our wins with Bellsmyre Housing, Molendinar Park Housing, Ruchazie Housing and Thistle Housing are all very important to us and with more on the horizon, they demonstrate our growing presence in the market and that we are clearly providing something that fills a much-needed gap in the housing sector."

Daniella Sprott, operations manager, Thistle Housing, said, "We chose Hub because our housing management system never seemed to deliver the right information either in the form or at the time we needed it without hours of data input.

"Hub not only provides us with an invaluable asset register but also the opportunity to create scenarios and change plans at the touch of a button, with our staff being particularly impressed with the Scottish Social Housing Charter reporting facility. We are only in the infancy of using Hub but we can already see how it will provide efficiencies across the business."

Julie Smillie, director, Molendinar Park Housing, said, "Hub will revolutionise our asset management practices and allow us to channel our investments intelligently."



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CYBER AWARENESS IN HOUSING

Jane Hancer, Director of Innovation, CC2i

At a recent cyber-awareness event, experts from the National Cyber Crime Unit (part of GCHQ) said that the UK was seen as a low risk, high reward environment for cyber attackers, that the majority of crimes are now cyber dependent or had a cyber angle, and that there needs to be a seismic shift in awareness of cyber-crime to combat the growing threats.

All very alarming, but absolutely true. With our growing dependence on technology and digital communications, every one of the 5.7 million businesses in the UK, including housing providers, their partners and suppliers, is a target for cyber criminals.



With housing providers holding significant amounts of personal and sensitive data as well as being connected to a range of public sector bodies, they are a growing target for cyber criminals. Whether it's phishing emails, malware attacks, DDoS or old-fashioned scams to find out personal passwords, cyber attacks are increasing all the time. While investment in cyber-security technologies and skills is increasing, staff awareness is still the main area that experts say needs to be addressed because the vast majority of incidents are the result of human error.

Cyber-awareness training is often seen as something that only IT professionals need to have or has been sandwiched into other IT training courses. It is rarely mandatory or an area that all employees are made to focus on. But as the attacks become more proficient and targeted, and as staff become more digital in and out of the



office, cyber training can no longer be seen as an IT adjunct or 'nice to have'.

And it's not just about one-off courses and subsequent 'tick box' learning; ensuring that all levels of your staff understand the threats and implications, and repeating the training regularly, are all key components in the fight against cyber-crime. However while there are generic cyber-awareness courses, we found that there was nothing that really met the housing sector's needs and spoke in housing's 'language'.

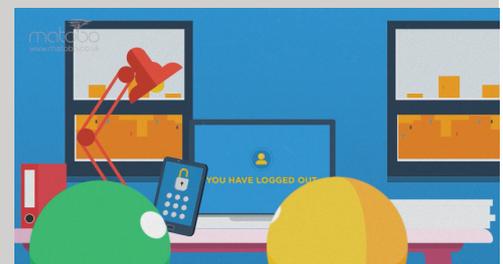
As a result, four housing providers decided to get together to co-design some sector-specific cyber-security and GDPR training. Gentoo, Guinness Partnership, Network Homes and Plymouth Community Homes, working with Matobo (the film-makers behind the BBC's cyber and GDPR awareness training), co-funded and co-designed 'Dojo Housing'.

Critical to the collaboration and the final product was the co-design process which saw each housing provider feed into the scripts with housing-related policies and protocols. The scripts went through a number of iterations and were then signed off by each housing association. This ensured that the training was comprehensive, spoken in terms that housing staff understood, using housing-related language.

Matobo then began work on creating engaging visuals, recording a voice-over, underpinned by iterative and clear learning techniques, sound design and so on. The result is 'Dojo Housing', the first housing-specific cyber training package.

Paul Sandersfield, head of data governance, Gentoo, said, "Collaborating with other similar-minded housing providers resulted in a great cyber-awareness training package tailored to our needs. It covers everything we need to provide our staff, including modules related to data protection."

Dojo Housing comprises 12 bite-sized, animated modules, covering areas such as passwords, scams, social media, online services, file sharing, portable devices, offline security and GDPR. It has now been rolled out across all staff at Network Homes, Gentoo, Guinness Partnership and Plymouth Community Homes, and has subsequently been commissioned by Wythenshawe Community Housing and Greenfields Community Housing.



As part of a separate council-led collaboration, a local authority version of the training was co-designed and produced, Dojo Local Government, which is now being used by over 70 UK councils. In total, over 300,000 housing, council and NHS staff now have access to Dojo awareness training.



It is interesting to note that absolutely every time a new housing provider or council commissions Dojo, they cite the co-design element as the key reason

CYBER AWARENESS IN HOUSING

Continued from previous page



for going ahead because the training package speaks to their staff in terms that they hear every day, that are relevant to their job and the wider business.

In a wider context, the National Cyber Security Centre has a range of guidance and tools for any UK organisation to use, plus weekly threat reports and a team in place to help in a significant cyber emergency. Alongside this, there are 15 regional WARPS (warning, advice and reporting points) helping public sector organisations and their partners defend critical business systems against attacks. There's even a live DDoS map showing attacks in real time (map.norsecorp.com)

which provides a global context to the situation.

For the housing sector, individual awareness of the threats and how to mitigate them needs to be a priority. And as the daily news coverage of cyber-attacks just keeps on coming, it can no longer be seen as someone else's problem.

Jane Hancer is director of innovation at CC2i.

NVT OFFERS VIIA CLOUD

NVT Group has announced that it has developed a new cloud-based service that is particularly relevant to smaller housing providers.



The Viia cloud has been designed by NVT developers in Scotland as a reliable, secure, affordable and scalable platform,

with the aim of enabling housing providers to migrate to a cloud based infrastructure without having to endure the challenges that are typically associated with doing so.

Stuart Kelly, business development manager, NVT, said, "Viia is different to other clouds because it has been built using open source software and industry standard hardware, which makes adoption costs more affordable than traditional cloud offerings.

"The Viia platform is so flexible that it enables you to take appropriate steps to the cloud, at a pace which suits your organisation's needs, so there are no more 'do everything or nothing' scenarios. And to help with GDPR compliance, Viia servers are only based in the United Kingdom, which means that your data is guaranteed to never leave the UK."

BERNICIA HARMONISES DESKTOP MANAGEMENT WITH IGEL

Bernicia Group has simplified the management of its entire desktop estate using Igel's endpoint management software.

As the result of a merger, Bernicia inherited a mix of old PC and thin-client desktops and wanted a cost effective, secure and flexible way of managing the desktops across four main sites and more than 20 satellite offices.

Adam Watson, network and infrastructure manager, Bernicia Group, said, "Rather than invest in a whole new fleet of hardware, we decided to use Igel's Universal Desktop Converter software to turn all the devices into Igel

desktops. It was a far more cost effective way to get more value from our existing desktops and to bring them under a single management system."

Igel's UDC is designed to repurpose existing hardware, taking just a couple of minutes to convert almost any x86 device, regardless of manufacturer or form factor, into a universally-deployable Igel Linux-based desktop. Connected to VMware virtual desktop infrastructure, the Igel devices can now be managed securely and remotely using Igel's endpoint management software.

Watson said, "The fleet of old PCs was difficult to manage but that's now in the

past thanks to Igel. The desktops were easy to convert and the management software lets us do everything remotely from one place and harmonise the configuration. As the old hardware dies, we simply swap it for a cost-effective replacement and immediately convert the device to an Igel. Even our home workers use laptops converted to Igel devices."



THRIVING THROUGH DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Kathryn Downs, Director of IT, Midland Heart

Peter Gough, Founder & Managing Partner, ORM

Leon Blakely, Senior Business Development Manager, Rackspace

Midland Heart's director of IT, Kathryn Downs, ORM's founder and managing partner, Peter Gough, and Rackspace's senior business development manager, Leon Blakely, explain how embracing new technologies could be a game changer for housing providers.

Midland Heart's Kathryn Downs said, "The biggest challenges in the social housing sector are an increasing pressure to build affordable housing, a government mandate to reduce rents by one per cent year-on-year and responding to the Housing Green Paper, published after the Grenfell Tower fire.

"The first two of those mean that we have to become much more efficient, investing in building new homes rather than spending on central overheads, but Grenfell Tower put the whole sector under a spotlight and showed how it must pay more attention to tenants.

"However, this is a very exciting time; it's rare that you find a sector undergoing transformation so readily and with such speed. Technology holds the key to addressing so many things around processes, efficiencies, rent reductions and giving tenants a voice."

Rackspace's Leon Blakely said, "There's a genuine need to engage with tenants differently and you must enhance how services are delivered. Changes to benefit payments will give tenants more choice and control over their spending, so the easier you can make transactions and engagement, the greater your chances of success in this shifting environment."

Doing better through digital

Peter Gough from ORM, a digital consultancy and Rackspace partner that helps housing providers improve through digital transformation, said, "You can maximise opportunities in the future by providing digital inclusivity. As an example from outside the housing sector, the IT revolution has led to some banks not only becoming more efficient, but also starting to think of customers as a valued and intrinsic part of their organisation."



Blakely added, "Rackspace has worked with Metro Bank, which stands out from its contemporaries through its highly customer-driven approach. This includes being open seven days a week, and a new customer being able to open an account without booking an appointment. Naturally, the bank also gives customers all the self-service 'bells and whistles' that they'd expect."

Self-service & streamlining processes

Gough said, "Self-service demand is perhaps the biggest change to address. Consider the volume of administrative paperwork – there are a lot of forms in social housing. Streamlining the process can save time and money, and provide a better audit trail."

Downs said, "Tenants often want to talk in person and on the phone. Any digital transformation must be an addition; tenants must be able to serve themselves but not at the expense of choice. The technologies we use must facilitate what they need to do, but also how they want to achieve that."

Emphasising the need for robust back-office technology, Gough said, "Front-end gloss isn't enough; you must dig deep into organisational structures. How does the call centre interact, what does 'understanding customer needs' mean for housing providers, and how can that be enabled by technology?"

Moving on from legacy systems

Downs said, "Most housing providers battle with their legacy technologies, the result of having been tied to a small number of technology providers for a long time because housing management

systems are quite bespoke. This has contributed to innovation being stifled in the sector.

"In the past, we'd approach the market with our requirements and we'd buy the technology that most closely-met requirements. We're now doing things differently, by asking the market for ideas and taking the challenge to the suppliers, and through that procurement process receiving proposals for how we might address that challenge."

Choosing the right partner

Downs said, "In terms of technology suppliers, we're looking for a breadth of experience and creativity in markets beyond just social housing. The other consideration is to be flexible in your approach. We know we won't get things right first time, all of the time, so there must be a willingness on both sides to try, learn and adapt."

Gough concluded, "Digital transformation can't be thought of as something that has a defined end-point or will stop at a certain point. What we must have now is an ongoing phased approach, so technology partnerships and managed service models are vital to the transformation puzzle."

Kathryn Downs is director of IT at Midland Heart. Peter Gough is the founder and managing partner of ORM. Leon Blakely is a senior business development manager for Rackspace.



HACKNEY'S LOW-CODE PLATFORM FROM OUTSYSTEMS

The London Borough of Hackney is using OutSystems' low-code development platform to double the speed of its mobile application developments.

Matthew Cain, head of digital and data, London Borough of Hackney, said, "One of my first tasks when I joined the council in 2017 was to understand its digital architecture. While it was reasonably robust and sophisticated, it was also out of date in certain areas. Having had previous experience of low-code platforms, I wanted to understand the potential scope of low-code and rapid application development in supporting Hackney's ambition to deliver better services."

The new initiative with OutSystems is part of the council's ambition to move more services online. The first product, Manage My Rent Account, is a mobile application



Matthew Cain,
Head of Digital
& Data, London
Borough of
Hackney

that has been designed for the 8,500 tenants in the council's properties. The council is also in the final stages of beta-testing another application, Manage My Tenancy, for housing officers who look after Hackney's estates.

Cain said, "We invited OutSystems along with a couple of other vendors to demonstrate their platforms. We were immediately struck by the flexibility of OutSystems' UX. It's really important that we continuously improve our users' experiences in order for them to succeed

unaided. We were also impressed by the openness of the product and its ability to access data via the 'rest API' points."

The OutSystems low-code platform has enabled the council's developers to speed up their pace of work and have a deeper understanding of users' needs.

Cain said, "OutSystems is a valuable enabler by allowing our developers to produce high-quality solutions quickly. We have a number of graduate and apprentice developers and the speed that they can now work and the quality and consistency of their output is amazing.

"We now expect to develop one new app per quarter over the next year. Previously, we were lucky if we could develop two apps in a year, so we have doubled our capability to deliver apps for the business."

HEXAGON SOFTWARE LAUNCHES HOUSING CLOUD PLATFORM



Hexagon Software has launched Hexagon Cloud, a new hosted platform for its housing management and finance software. Hexagon Cloud will enable users to review or update information from core back-office systems, such as viewing housing information, approving invoices or entering account transactions from any internet-enabled device.

Mitchell Hill, managing director, Hexagon Software, said, "Hexagon Cloud will enable housing providers to achieve administrative efficiencies and increase productivity while reducing the total cost of ownership.

Hexagon Cloud is a native cloud application that uses a microservice-based architecture so that updates and new features can be introduced to all customers as soon as they are released. It runs on a clustered container infrastructure providing elastic scalability and resilience, enabling customers to create new environments in minutes. OAuth authentication provides secure access to the application via Microsoft Office365 and most social media platforms.

"With no upfront expenditure and low monthly costs per user, Hexagon Cloud delivers greater, more cost-effective access to business intelligence and workflows to improve organisational performance while eliminating the technicalities surrounding the operating system, device or browser compatibility."

Hill added, "Hexagon Cloud differentiates us from competitors with older, monolithic applications that require major upgrade projects to take advantage of any new functionality."

BEST-OF-BREED APPLICATIONS VS. ERP SYSTEMS

A single IT platform or best-of-breed?



Neville Brown, Director, Itica

Housing Technology interviewed Itica's director, Neville Brown, on the merits of best-of-breed applications vs. enterprise resource planning (ERP) software in social housing.

What's the background to the single platform vs. best-of-breed debate?

The housing sector is undergoing significant change at a time when the options for delivering systems are increasing, therefore it's right that housing providers should continuously monitor and consider other ways to deliver their IT requirements. Many providers are broadening their activities into other areas, such as commercial developments and the off-site manufacturing of properties.

Housing mergers, and the numbers will accelerate during the next three years as early examples prove the rationale and a model for do's and don'ts, are creating businesses of increasing size and complexity. Add in the 'digital agenda', service and process integration/automation and increased regulation, and it's no wonder that housing providers will be reviewing their current systems' portfolio. Nevertheless, most providers' core business will remain the management of tenants and housing assets, something that is well covered at an operational level by existing IT suppliers within the sector.

Developing a technology strategy should never be the starting point; housing providers must first decide what business outcomes are needed to deliver their vision and strategic intent and develop a plan to achieve them. Those outcomes should be defined in sufficient detail to establish how best to deliver the requirements, looking at all aspects of the many capabilities required, and driven by business need rather than technical ideology or bias.

People and especially culture play a huge role here; housing providers should avoid the trap of believing that implementing new systems will, on their own, deliver a change in culture.

This upfront effort to establish the 'why?' and the 'how?' is essential because the examples I've seen suggest that early ERP adopters' experiences have been mixed and that some have had to plug gaps with point solutions; perhaps that is an argument for adopting a hybrid approach.

Are housing providers different?

Sector-specific software was developed because nothing existed which could manage the complexities brought by regulation, and housing providers may understandably consider generic ERP as not covering all of their needs that the housing-specific solutions have met over a number of years. The alternatives will mature over time, and many providers have adopted a 'wait and see' approach to ERP.

I don't think housing providers see themselves as special or different. It's more that they have invested significant sums in their systems and processes, and in many cases can't see a compelling reason to embark on a hugely disruptive, expensive and potentially risky programme of change, particularly when the sector is facing so many issues.

I also think that many housing providers will shy away from entering into indirect relationships with large, monolithic software providers, supplying systems through large SIs or resellers. Many providers that we talk to value the direct access they have and the reasonable balance of power between them and their key vendors.

The pros and cons of best-of-breed

The primary advantages are the functionality of specialist systems, acquisition costs tend to be lower and there is flexibility to change or substitute providers when business needs change, cognisant that there will be a cost to change that element.

Best-of-breed, and for that matter an ERP, requires access to resources and capabilities to implement, support and change the solution. Although the skillsets are different in each case, the question is whether the housing provider can recruit and retain the necessary expertise and, in both cases, will be reliant on the supplier or a third party to support them.

With best-of-breed, there is the longstanding issue of data integration (APIs and other interfaces) and an ongoing commitment to testing every time the suppliers issue a new release, so adopting a policy that a systems portfolio should be provided from as few providers as possible will reduce the risk, cost and complexity of ongoing change. Master data management (MDM) also becomes a much more important capability because data may be held in several different places, each requiring its own controls to ensure veracity, leading to the goal of a single version of the truth.

The increased focus on fully automating a tenant's 'digital journey' is bringing challenges for those with a disparate systems portfolio. For example, a self-appointed repair requires (at a minimum) access to and workflow between the requesting system, the repairs system, the scheduling system, the financial or

other authorisation system, possibly asset management and finally the CRM function – not easy to do if those systems are supplied by different vendors with no integration between them.

Is ERP right for you?

Just as 'cloud' has many definitions, ERP suffers from the same issue and defining what ERP means is a first step; this could be as simple as agreeing that as much of the system requirement as possible comes from a single vendor.

Conceptually, ERP systems provide for a single data source for all elements within the system (important for data governance and reporting). They also offer wide-ranging, integrated functionality, from back-office through to CRM, with the constraint that an ERP system might not cover every aspect of a housing provider's operations.

How seamlessly the integrated platform performs in practice is largely determined by how the solution is structured under the covers; was it designed from the ground up in a coherent, all-encompassing architecture or has it been constructed through the piecemeal absorption of different functionalities through acquisitions? The latter may be hidden under a blemish-free skin, but dig a little deeper and the problems begin to surface. Of course, it could be argued that this is an issue with the housing-specific systems as well, so the same question should be asked.

ERP providers are generally very large organisations with a single focus and therefore provide a high level of assurance that they have the resources to develop the product and will also have longevity in the marketplace. There is also the advantage that there is only one supplier relationship to manage. However, housing providers should assure themselves that they and their reseller/systems integrator have the requisite leverage (relationship and contract) for both the implementation and support of the solution.

Even though ERP suppliers are adopting subscription-based models, that level of assurance comes at a price; within housing, cost examples have been in the tens of millions of pounds, excluding the business re-engineering costs. A housing provider would be reliant on a vendor-approved integrator (effectively a service provision monopoly) as not many will have the resources or capability to configure, install and manage an ERP

system. The level of integration within an ERP system means that it's then difficult to 'de-integrate', which some might perceive as 'lock-in', although if the solution does what is required then that's perhaps less of an issue.

The middle ground between BoB & ERP

In the past, housing management systems have tended not to focus on the back-office or customer-facing systems. However, that middle ground (in modern parlance, a 'hybrid' model) has been underway for a while as HMS providers partner with others to offer functionality, data sharing and integration, an example being the repairs module linked to a scheduling system.

Several scenarios are emerging, with some housing providers re-engineering every aspect of their operations onto a single platform, while others are considering integrating the back-office and leaving the operational systems on their current software, and many are using a workflow-based CRM as their customer-facing systems capability.

What can't be ignored is the impact 'cloud' services will have on technical architectures. For example, one of our customers is implementing the full Microsoft suite including CRM, collaboration and document management while leaving their HMS, finance and asset management on their existing platforms.

All of this means that the days of point-solution sourcing are ending as a more holistic approach is needed, requiring housing providers to be smarter in their approach to procurement.

Regardless of the route taken, the key is to create a systems portfolio with as few suppliers as possible, and in every scenario the need for robust data governance is paramount, not forgetting stewardship of the supplier relationships.

The reality is that all systems, whether a generic ERP or a dedicated HMS, will require configuration to align with housing providers' business requirements. At the same time, housing providers should resist the temptation to customise beyond the product configuration; heavy customisation or bespoke development stores up future problems ('technical debt') relating to new releases, integration and changing business requirements. It is also much easier to change a business process

than make a system do something that it was never designed to do.

ERP suppliers aren't housing specialists...

This is not surprising because ERP's provenance is in manufacturing and was formerly known as manufacturing resource planning, morphing into ERP around 20 years ago. While ERP could be successful in certain (or even most) areas of housing operations, a vital task is to identify what an ERP doesn't or can't cover. It still all boils down to a housing provider's strategy and the capabilities (such as people, processes and systems) that are required, and it could also mean that a decision is taken that sets a level of acceptance; for example, "we are aiming to deliver 80 per cent of our needs from one platform, and that platform could well be an ERP."

Could the latest HMS be used as a single ERP-style platform?

Yes, most definitely. It's worth noting that pure best-of-breed is dying out as many HMS vendors redevelop their solutions or add modules to cover a broader range of functionality and offer 'out-of-the-box' integration. With that in mind, housing providers should consider foregoing that last bit of elegance or non-essential features if they can get other benefits from the integration of processes and data, while fully understanding how that integration has been achieved.

Recent entrants into the market offer integration across several business functions but as with ERP systems, housing providers must establish what business functions those new entrants don't cover and also establish whether migration to a newer system will deliver the required business benefits; is it worth the effort, disruption and cost, given that software typically accounts for just 20 per cent of the overall cost? Of course, if the housing provider is running on old versions of their core systems or they are subject to end-of-life notices and change is inevitable, then that is also the time to consider all options, including cloud and ERP as well as the sector's current providers.

Neville Brown is a director of Itica.



BEST-OF-BREED APPLICATIONS VS. ERP SYSTEMS

Edge value – How to achieve BoBSVoT...



Aidan Dunphy, Chief Product Officer, Hedgehog Lab

The premise of enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems is simple; by integrating all of an organisation's processes and data into a single platform, efficiency, effectiveness and security can all be increased while lowering the total cost of ownership (TCO).

To further 'acronymise', in housing providers' IT departments this is often conflated with achieving a single version of the truth (SVoT) in which each business datum has a consistent definition and value, no matter where you look for it.

Anyone who has tried this will know that it's a never-ending endeavour, with goalposts moving and parts of the organism constantly decaying. Nevertheless, it's attractive to frustrated C-suites seeking to emulate the success of household names. Alas, their staff usually hate ERP systems because they're designed with compliance and consistency in mind, with the user experience (UX) tending to be a lower priority.

Contrast this with best-of-breed (BoB) solutions, which are designed to solve a specific problem as well as possible. Whether it's workforce scheduling, mobile repairs, rent-arrears forecasting or asset inspections, someone has expended a lot of effort to refine a solution until it's about as good as it can be. Decision-makers in departmental silos buy these to solve their tactical problems, and their staff buy-in because it makes their jobs easier. Meanwhile, the IT director is being hauled up by the executive team because, despite the promises made in the vendor's winning bid, nothing integrates to anything and they still can't get any useful business intelligence.

Having used an ERP system prevalent in the consultancy market for a year, I can confirm that the same problems surface every time. For example, I'm currently trying to find a decent way to schedule people on projects to overcome the awful UX of the ERP's own tool, but I'm about to give up due to the difficulty of integration.

The HMS suppliers fight this battle every day. They try to maintain recurring revenues by offering integrated modules, selling the importance of integrated data. However, I know from personal experience that this can be very difficult when your competitor has very shiny bells and whistles festooning their product, blinding the buyer to the problems they will encounter by implementing yet another silo system. Some of the HMS vendors (mainly the ones that have to report quarterly to shareholders...) try to lock in their customers, whereas others have taken a longer-term view and invested in opening up their systems via APIs.

Yet neither approach offers the buyer both the strategic necessity of integrated data as well as the tactical advantage of great UX which engages and motivates their users. HMS vendors labour to create mobile apps and the like, but it's not really in their DNA and they can't hope to emulate the fast-moving tactical solutions demanded by an agile business environment.

It's important to recognise that these problems are very different in scope, and that it's not viable for any single vendor to excel at both. The major ERP vendors have recognised this and acquired or partnered with a plethora of specialist solution providers. They're not directly dependent on these suppliers for their revenue; instead their 'edge' solutions satisfy market demand for excellent UX in specialised domains and at the same time consolidate the position of the central ERP platform.

Inspired by the concept of edge computing, one might term this 'edge value' – significant operational benefits are derived from peripheral (and sometimes

disposable) BoB apps, but the centralised SVoT is preserved at all times. As long as this strategic benefit is assured, then it becomes a relatively straightforward calculation to assess the return on investment of, say, building native apps which you know will probably be obsolete within a few years due to the pace of change in the consumer tech arena.

Software architects in the established HMS vendors agonise over and can be paralysed by contemplation of the long-term consequences of their decisions, but if you don't deliver value fast enough you might not have a long term. In the agile digital technology world, the focus is on time-to-market, and as long as you solve today's problems while at the same time providing a good return on investment, why does it matter if a piece of software doesn't last ten years? After all, who wants to use ten-year-old software?

So my exhortation to the housing sector would be: abandon the mind-set of buying 'one system to rule them all' every seven years. Acknowledge the value that your HMS probably gives you in a boring but business-critical way, but move fast to build, launch, revise and re-build UX for your users, whether they are your staff, tenants, partners or executives. See your 'edge value' as your product, and manage it using a quarterly roadmap, accepting that this means you might have to pivot and change how you do things, repeatedly. Be bold: excellence is a state of mind, and isn't so hard to achieve for your users if you really want to!

Aidan Dunphy is chief product officer at Hedgehog Lab.

BEST-OF-BREED APPLICATIONS VS. ERP SYSTEMS

Best-of-breed 1, ERP 0...



Amy Boyd, Co-Founder & Chief Technology Officer, FaultFixers

When reviewing which software to buy for a housing provider, much of the required functionality, such as asset management, HR, rent collection and so on, is found in traditional ERPs.

If you wanted to make a snap purchasing decision, an ERP system will typically fulfil a housing provider's basic needs. For the first few weeks or months, it might seem like everything is perfect. But as all organisations learn over time, the business processes that you thought were simple are only simple when everything is taking the normal route. As soon as you start deviating from the process, some growing pains appear. And as we all know, housing has a lot of opportunities for processes to need tweaking!

As agile product developers, when building FaultFixers we interviewed dozens of people working in a variety of housing and facility management (FM) functions to find out what their digital pain points were. One complaint we heard again and again was that the inability to customise ERPs to the business's own processes causes employees to waste time trying to find work-arounds and creates a frustrated workforce. ERP systems are sold as 'one size fits all', but the future of effective software will come from being agile and responsive to a business's needs and processes, which is where best-of-breed applications shine.

Another common complaint surprised us – we thought that new members of staff would quickly be productive using ERP systems because we expected them to have used a similar ERP system in previous jobs. We were told the opposite – there are so many ERP systems and they are so over-architected and complicated that it took new employees

weeks to feel comfortable using the software. By contrast, in organisations using housing- and FM-specific software, most of our interviewees stated they were productive very early on.

As housing providers battle massive challenges, notably ongoing austerity, an uncertain future with Brexit and the fallout from the Grenfell Tower tragedy, they must catch up with the more advanced private-sector companies in a key area: IT. With many housing providers still running repair logs, work orders and tenant lists on Excel (in some cases we even saw paper!), it is long overdue that they start using IT to improve and automate processes.

The ERP systems installed in housing providers are too expensive to buy, too complicated to learn, and are typically hosted on-premise (and who wants that hassle in 2018?). Don't just take my word for it – look up the big ERP mobile apps on Google Play or the Apple App Store, and you'll see that the plethora of bad reviews speak for themselves!

At FaultFixers, we firmly believe in sector-specific, best-of-breed software. One of our core principles is that by focusing on housing and FM and doing deep user research with operatives and back-office staff, this is what has enabled us to build software that people actually enjoy using.

To make a comparison to the consumer software space, I think a smart move was when Facebook split Messenger into a separate app, effectively saying "use what you need, we won't force you to use

everything". After then buying WhatsApp and Instagram, Facebook kept them as separate apps. This forward thinking has protected them in the wake of the privacy scandals of the last few years; even as usage of Facebook is in decline in its core markets, WhatsApp and Instagram continue to grow.

Amy Boyd is the co-founder and chief technology officer of FaultFixers.



BEST-OF-BREED APPLICATIONS VS. ERP SYSTEMS

Goliath vs. Lots of Davids...

Making the most of best-of-breed applications and ERP in housing



Housing Technology interviewed ERP, application and integration specialists from DtL Creative (David Loudon, founder), Hitachi Solutions Europe (Ciara McMillan, industry director for housing), Mobysoft (Glenn Phillips, CTO) and Manifest Software Solutions (Dave Carr, director) on the merits of housing providers using a single ERP-style platform vs. best-of-breed software applications for their various business operations.

ERP on its own?

DtL Creative's founder, David Loudon, said, "I think that a housing provider, assuming it was large enough, would only consider an ERP system if it was not only willing to think very differently about the way it currently approaches systems thinking but also if it had suitably skilled in-house resources and/or willing to pay for external consultants.

"Having implemented large ERP systems in different sectors, where we always had large teams of people working on them, as well as having been part of the management team of a housing provider, I've seen both sides of the story. In terms of how implementation decisions are made by housing providers' boards, there is a general trend to play it safe and only choose suppliers with a track record in housing. I believe this could be detrimental because there are so many other software vendors that could deliver good solutions, no matter which sector. There is also the fact that wider competition would help drive better solutions and lower costs."



"There isn't a middle ground between ERP and best-of-breed. It's rather akin to a choice of lifestyle; you can choose to rent a house or buy a house, but you can't do both."

David Loudon, Founder, DtL Creative

Ciara McMillan, industry director for housing at Hitachi Solutions Europe, said, "An ERP system solves the

problems arising from having multiple, incompatible application systems which prevent a housing provider from understanding the true situation concerning its tenants and housing assets. An ERP holds all of the tenant data in a single, coherent database which makes it easier to understand the tenants' needs and launch new services such as self-service."

Mobysoft's CTO, Glenn Phillips, said, "Are there any housing providers where they are successfully only using an ERP system? Over 99 per cent of housing providers use a housing management system in some guise or other, and even those switching to CRM, for example, still use the shell of a HMS for certain applications or as simply as a data repository.

"In our experience, what housing providers are doing is plugging in best-of-breed cloud-based applications, such as RentSense, to their main systems. These meet niche criteria and add demonstrable value. With housing providers now having so much data, there will be more tools developed, outside their ERP or HMS, that help them to make sense of their data and resolve specific issues."

Is housing-specific software really necessary?

Regarding the question of whether housing providers are so different that they need their own sector-specific software, Manifest Software Solutions' director, Dave Carr, said, "Having worked in a number of industries, there certainly

isn't a single solution that would suit every organisation in any one of those sectors. Housing providers are right to want sector-specific software. Some of their processes are unique to the sector, and there's a vast amount of knowledge preserved in millions of lines of code within the applications that they use.



"Best-of-breed applications provide quick fixes for individual business requirements but they don't address a housing provider's holistic needs."

Ciara McMillan, Industry Director for Housing, Hitachi Solutions Europe

"However, it seems to be very much the case that housing providers are driving application development, not the other way around, which is why we end up with sector-specific products. If housing providers could define their business operations more clearly then perhaps it wouldn't matter so much what platform the solution is delivered on."

Loudon from DtL Creative said, "I think that for many housing providers, regarding their entrenched use of HMS, the idea that 'we've always done it that way' is a considerable comfort factor. There is definitely an attitude that housing providers believe their challenges and requirements are unique, but they aren't. Most of their business processes, transactions, challenges, goals and so on are just as applicable to any other service-led business. It's all



"There is a middle ground between best-of-breed and ERP, with well-known names in ERP such as SAP, Microsoft and Sage having whole communities of partners developing bolt-on solutions."

Dave Carr, Director, Manifest Software Solutions

about risk vs. reward when moving out of housing providers' comfort zones."

Is best-of-breed right?

Extolling the advantages of best-of-breed applications, Mobysoft's Phillips said, "Best-of-breed systems typically use the latest technology and are designed for a specific niche or need. For example, they are cloud-based, platform-neutral regarding the ERP/HMS, much more agile, and they limit both the time and expense of managing or building applications in-house."

Hitachi's McMillan said, "Very simply, best-of-breed applications provide quick fixes for individual business requirements but they don't address a housing provider's holistic needs. To some extent, best-of-breed applications create more problems due to the need to then integrate them and the data they contain, as well as requiring more time, skills and costs to maintain."

Carr from Manifest Software added, "Regardless of whether best-of-breed means the best product in the market to fulfil a particular requirement or the product with the greatest foothold in the sector, it should always mean that the product's functionalities are based on known use and business processes, straight out-of-the-box. It shouldn't need any major development programmes for it to function; best-of-breed should mean swift, smooth and cost-effective deployment. The disadvantages only arise when there are problems with integration, often from software providers who don't support open integration architectures as well as they could."

Or is ERP better?

DtL Creative's Loudon said, "Although ERP systems are usually based on tried-and-tested technology platforms, one of the questions we always ask is: how integrated is it really – did the developers build the whole solution on a uniform platform, or have disparate systems been acquired, linked

superficially and perhaps hidden from you? Keeping the question of integration, hidden or otherwise, and your business processes in mind, will your end-users have a consistent experience and easy access to data across all areas?"

McMillan from Hitachi said, "The advantage of ERP means having a single source of data, eliminating the need for integration. The disadvantage is that because the implementation is holistic and takes into account all of a housing provider's needs, the implementation will take longer, require greater resources and cost more, balanced against better long-term benefits. In short, ERP demands a longer perspective in terms of housing strategy and technology investment."

Mobysoft's Phillips said, "An ERP system is useful for being a data repository tool, where master data can be stored. However, ERP systems are so broad that housing providers usually have two main options: do a standard implementation of the ERP system or a bespoke and more complex implementation of it. The first option will mean that the system will be unlikely to match their precise needs, so they'll have to make do with further inefficiencies, while the second option will be more expensive to set up in the first place and will then be more complicated to maintain, with no guarantee of success along the way."



"ERP systems are so broad that housing providers usually have two main options: do a standard implementation of the ERP system or a bespoke and more complex implementation of it."

Glenn Phillips, CTO, Mobysoft

Finding the middle ground

Regarding the question of whether housing providers can find a middle ground between best-of-breed applications and a single ERP platform, Loudon from DtL Creative said, "There isn't a middle ground to be found. The two options are very different in terms of architecture, implementation and, in some cases, usability. As analogy, it's rather akin to a choice of lifestyle; you can choose to rent a house or buy a house, but you can't do both."

Carr from Manifest Software countered, "I think that there is a middle ground

between best-of-breed and ERP, and as a systems integrator, it's a core part of our role to find that middle ground, with many larger companies also support this idea. Well-known names in ERP such as SAP, Microsoft and Sage have whole communities of partners developing bolt-on solutions and they are happy for them to do so.

"The difference for the housing sector is that the communities delivering innovative solutions are not always welcomed to the same extent by the major ERP providers, and the integration routes and methods are not as transparent, making that middle ground far harder to find."

Hitachi's McMillan said, "There are numerous ways of combining best-of-breed and ERP. They will offer some of the advantages of ERP-style solutions but they won't eliminate all of the disadvantages; CRM is a good example of this, where they can combine back-office data into a presentation layer but it doesn't solve the question of having a single, reliable data source."

A lack of housing expertise

By their very nature, ERP suppliers tend not to be housing-sector specialists, so why choose them for housing? Carr from Manifest Software said, "ERP suppliers have the skills and technology to build great solutions, and housing providers have the sector-specific knowledge and understanding. In the same way that collaborations happen across a multitude of other sectors, there's absolutely no reason why the two can't work together to bridge the gap."

DtL Creative's Loudon said, "One area of consideration when choosing a software partner is obviously housing experience, and most housing IT providers have consultants who have worked in housing which is certainly beneficial. That said, I would argue that if other sectors can choose ERP solutions spanning across different business models then housing should be no exception.

"However, it does depend on a housing provider's resources and its state of mind in accepting that it is a different kind of project altogether. Furthermore, ERP suppliers can offer greater long-term stability when compared with housing IT suppliers merging, getting bought, or struggling with R&D development and growth."

Continued on next page

Goliath vs. Lots of Davids...

Continued from previous page

ERP instead of HMS?

With the advent of the latest breed of mostly cloud-based housing management systems, could they be used, in effect, as a housing provider's ERP platform?

Hitachi's McMillan said, "No, because they are not ERPs. An ERP system starts with the finance module and everything else is intrinsically linked to that. Ultimately, this means that in a well-designed system, everything can be costed. ERP is therefore a fundamentally different concept to an HMS, so for housing providers to be sustainable and build more homes, they need to consider the benefits and efficiencies that an ERP-led strategy could bring not just to their internal operations but to the tenants as well."

Mobysoft's Phillips said, "Considering the latest housing management systems, it's important to take into account the fact that the first iteration of any software is almost always imperfect; in fact, I would argue that it usually demonstrates how much more work is needed to make it properly functional. In the longer term, using an HMS as a surrogate for a 'proper' ERP system could be the achievable, but it's not realistic in the shorter-term."

Manifest Software's Carr said, "An HMS would likely deliver the best core platform on up-to-date technology, but it might not always be able to keep up with the demands of rapid technological advances. However, as long as we remember to encourage and

welcome the entrepreneurs who push the boundaries and focus on solutions to very specific issues, then yes, an HMS could become a housing provider's ERP platform."

Housing Technology would like to thank DtL Creative (David Loudon), Hitachi Solutions Europe (Ciara McMillan), Manifest Software Solutions (Dave Carr) and Mobysoft (Glenn Phillips) for contributing their thoughts and opinions to this article.



GENERAL NEWS



CAN YOU INNOVATE BACKWARDS?

Ryan Dempsey, CEO & Founder, The Compliance Workbook

When we talk about innovation in social housing, we always assume it means doing or creating something new to address something going forward, such as addressing the status quo to make the future better. What if we could innovate to address legacy issues, removing the need to create a date in the future where everything will be better with the new way of working? What if this could also be done without changing current processes?

The concept above is one of the biggest issues in asset management; the ability to track the performance of something over a period of time, including historical milestones, is one of the most important aspects of system journeys. The 'installing and ignoring' mentality leads to a reactive sector and a game of chance.

Social housing has over four million properties, with many more millions of assets inside them. The 'blue sky'

thinking is to get everyone in social housing to use one product to capture everything about everything, but that's never going to happen for any number of legal, business and individual personality reasons. Other options include the internet of things and, eventually, the internet of everything (IoE) but, as anyone who works in the sector will know, as soon as those sorts of technologies are introduced to tenants, the challenge of "big brother is watching me" arises and causes us increased workloads.

So, right now, how do we know where the issues are? Are we focusing on the high level, such as the number of properties with an in-date gas service or are we looking at the milestones; when was the boiler installed, when was it last serviced, how accurate up to now are the predicted milestones we created when we first installed the appliance? For electrical systems, is the installation still

performing as it was designed to, and if not, you are already at risk whether you have an in-date document or not.

Innovative technology used alongside the best asset management systems on the market (for example, Orchard's ProMaster) can give you access to more data than you ever thought possible. That data then intelligently mapped into one location or graph can provide benchmark statistics around compliance which are easier to plan towards than industry guidance written without the sector's input.

Playing catch-up doesn't have to happen, changing what you do now to get this doesn't have to happen, truly innovative technology gives you amazing outputs at the touch of a button.

Ryan Dempsey is the CEO and founder of The Compliance Workbook.



HOW HUMANS, ALEXA AND ROBOTS CAN IMPROVE LIVES

Chris Jones, Pre-Sales Consultant, Orchard

If somebody said to you five years ago, that artificial intelligence (AI) would now be making inroads into the housing sector, would you have believed it or simply dismissed it?

Looking at AI from a more general perspective, at the turn of the millennium, I wonder how many people truly conceived it as being possible that we would be using our voice as a primary interface between us and artificial intelligence, as we do with Siri or Alexa? Would we have considered it feasible that a robot named Sophia would be introduced into the United Nations and later granted citizenship? What would the reaction have been to the suggestion that AI would be able to more accurately diagnose a disease than human? Yet all of these scenarios are a reality and having a positive impact in 2018.

To some people, this would have been realistic, given that research into AI began in the 1950s. However, the majority of people would have met such ideas with scepticism and thought that AI would be at most a gimmick at this stage.

Even as AI started being used more significantly, the doubts still lingered; in industry and science, it was considered to be out of the reach of the average company. Only the likes of NASA, the military or multi-national companies were ever thought to be able to benefit from it. From a consumer standpoint, developments such as Alexa were nothing more than toys to show off to our friends or family. This scepticism was soon then bolstered with doses of fear.

As with all things, it's in our nature to question and be fearful of the unknown. AI in one sense could be viewed as posing the greatest potential threat to humanity we have ever witnessed and there will naturally be people who are convinced that it is inevitable. Arguments are already being made that AI will take our jobs, will become too clever for us to control, or that maybe we will soon

be the pets of the world rather than the master and then next thing you know we will be fighting alongside John Connor against the machines... okay, perhaps not necessarily the last one.

While I can empathise with such fears to an extent, I think it's more helpful to focus on the positive impact AI is already having and what else it could enable us to do, such as:

- Within the healthcare sector in China, AI is being used to diagnose cancer in the absence of enough radiographers.
- In America, AI is being used to help manage diabetes.
- Farmers are using AI and drones to monitor crops and maximise yields.
- There are robots such as Pepper which have been designed to complement various human services, a notable example being social care. By being able to recognise emotion, Pepper can alert medical staff to people in need of attention, provide entertainment or act as a smart platform to enable residents to make contact with their families.

Each of these examples is evidence of how AI can empower us to provide better services, a better standard of living and ultimately help us all more. All of these are objectives which are ingrained into the social housing sector too, so how can we leverage AI, when is the time to do it, and who will do it?

AI's positive impact on housing

Over the last year or so, there has been a clear trend in our sector towards the use of data science, machine learning and AI. It could be argued that the combined topic of data science and machine learning is already becoming the norm and is now a topic that we expect to read about and see. And although AI is still seen as the next step, it's actually here to be used now.

There are already some examples of its positive impact in our sector. For example, at a Chartered Institute of

Housing event earlier this year, I showed a video of a tenant engaging with Alexa and getting information she needed by voice command. Furthermore, chatbots have been already deployed by housing providers to provide an additional communications channel and 24/7 support to tenants.

This is a good start but it is just the tiny tip of a very large iceberg. It's clear that there are so many other opportunities for this technology in our sector. For example, robots could help with tasks such as shopping, lifting heavy items or reminding a tenant to take their medicine.

Alexa could be used more to give tenants additional self-service methods. What if a tenant could diagnose a repair by using their phone to scan the object, with the resulting imagery then processed via deep learning. Once diagnosed, the relevant repair and skill set would be determined and resources automatically scheduled for the best date available, based on the tenant's predefined preferences. To take this a step further, what if a robot could manage everyday repairs in a property, leaving contractors free to focus on more complex and urgent jobs? A final example, which is arguably the most human of them all, is the provision of companionship, someone to talk to, to gain advice from or even just to listen. Something we can't always provide at the right time.

Hopefully by now I've opened your eyes to the idea that AI is no longer something for the future; it's here now and its benefits will only continue to evolve. AI is no longer seen as a gimmick and it is positively affecting a wide variety of sectors and companies of all shapes and sizes.

The benefits of AI need to be embraced by the housing sector; the opportunity is there, the next stage is to decide what we are going to do with it.

Chris Jones is a pre-sales consultant at Orchard.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW GDPR?

We all think we know how GDPR works, but do we really?

ParaDPO's co-founder Clifford Barton explains how when running GDPR workshops and tutorials, arguably the best approach to initiating the uninitiated into new territory is to make it fun and ease them in, rather than confront them with a barrage of information. On the premise of trying not to make something intrinsically scholastic even more so, Barton has found multiple-choice quizzes to be a useful tool in the GDPR learning canon.

This article therefore tests your GDPR knowledge, with the answers at the end. Fuller and more comprehensive explanations for each can be found from our website (www.paradpo.co.uk).



Q1 | According to the ICO, how many lawful bases for processing data are specified in the GDPR?

- a. 2
- b. 4
- c. 6
- d. 8
- e. 10

Q2 | To comply with GDPR, companies must be able to present (following a mandatory request by the ICO) how they consume personal data in the context of application systems used in their organisation. What is the name of the artefact used for this function?

- a. Information authorisation record
- b. Information asset register
- c. Information access request
- d. Information availability roadmap
- e. Information acknowledgement receipt

Q3 | Which of the following does not describe the function of a data protection impact assessment (DPIA)?

- a. A DPIA must be considered every time a new project initiative is engaged.
- b. A DPIA helps an organisation identify, assess and mitigate privacy risks that may come about due to their processing of data.
- c. A DPIA must be performed every time a new project initiative is engaged.
- d. Performing a DPIA shows due diligence and demonstrates personal data accountability.
- e. A DPIA must always be engaged if a new process or system involving personal data is introduced.

Q4. The ICO is assigned a number of responsibilities aimed at making sure data protection regulations are complied with. What is one of those responsibilities?

- a. Review of contracts and BCRs on compliance with the regulations.
- b. Assessing codes of conduct for specific sectors relating to the processing of personal data.
- c. Investigation of all data breaches of which they have been notified.
- d. Defining a minimum set of measures to be taken to protect personal data.

Q5 | The GDPR distinguishes 'sensitive personal data' as a special category (SCD) of personal data; from the following, which are examples of SCD?

- a. Membership of a trade association.
- b. Subscription to a scientific journal for politics.
- c. An address for casting a vote at a general election.
- d. A bank account number.
- e. A clinical appointment in a hospital.

Q6 | Which rights of the data subject are explicitly defined by the GDPR?

- a. Personal data must be always changed at the request of the data subject.
- b. A copy of personal data must be provided in the format requested by the data subject.
- c. Personal data must always be erased if a data subject so requests it.
- d. A data subject has the right to demand a data risk assessment from the organisation holding their data.
- e. Access to personal data without any cost for the data subject.

Q7 | A security breach has occurred in a company information system holding personal data. What must the controller do first?

- a. Take a vote from the executive to see if they collectively agree to reporting the error.
- b. Assess whether personal data of a sensitive nature has or may have been unlawfully processed.
- c. Assess the likelihood of it affecting the rights and freedoms of individuals.
- d. Assess the risk of adverse effects to the data subjects using a privacy impact assessment (PIA).
- e. Report the breach immediately with the relevant data protection authority.

Q8 | Some websites track visitor-activity and store their information for marketing purposes. Should the website notify the visitor that their information is being used for marketing purposes?

- a. Only when the visitor clicks the 'more information' link.
- b. Never.
- c. Sometimes.
- d. Always.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW GDPR?

Continued from previous page

Q9 | According to the GDPR, what is the definition of 'processing' of personal data?

- Collecting personal data as a legitimate interest.
- Only operations in which the data is being shared on social media or transferred by email or otherwise through the internet.
- Any operation that can be performed on personal data, except erasing and destroying.
- Only operations in which the personal data is used for the purposes for which it was collected.
- Any operation that can be performed on personal data following collection.

Q10 | Which of the below best describes the principle of data minimisation?

- The organisation must collect as little data as possible to protect the privacy and interests of the data subjects.
- Data must be adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.

- To keep data manageable, it must be stored in such a manner that requires a minimal amount of storage.
- The number of items that is collected per data subject may not exceed the upper limit stated by the data protection authority (DPA).
- Data must conform to ICO data quality standards.

Note; there are more comprehensive answers available from www.paradpo.co.uk.

Clifford Barton is the co-founder of ParaDPO.

- 7c:** Yes – data breaches must be reported to the ICO within 72 hours if the DPO identifies a "risk to the rights and freedoms of individuals"; if there is a high risk then the affected data subjects themselves need to be notified.
- 8d:** Always – the website has an obligation to notify the visitor that their information is being used for marketing purposes which enables them to decide whether they wish to proceed. They also have the right to object to the processing of personal data concerning him or her for marketing purposes. But this is an area that will be affected by the EU E-Privacy directive.
- 9e:** True – see GDPR Article 4(2).
- 10b:** Data must be adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.
- 6e:** The first subject access request is free, though if the data subject requests an excessive amount of information, a charge can be applied.
- 1d:** There are six: consent, contract, legal obligation, vital interests, public task, and legitimate interests. Special category and criminal data have additional considerations.
- 2b:** Information asset register – this should include the records of processing, data protection logs and associated information.
- 3c:** As part of project lifecycle assessment process, a section must include a DPIA determine if a full DPIA is necessary. Typically, this is checklist question-set, the result of which would determine if a full DPIA is necessary.
- 4b:** A DPO should provide general advice on how to comply with the regulation.
- 5e:** A hospital appointment is considered as special category data because it concerns the state of health of an individual. Membership of a trade union is also special category data.

ANSWERS

ITICA APPOINTS NEW DIRECTORS



(L-R) Neville Brown, Martin Joy & John Doughty, Itica

Itica has recently appointed Martin Joy and John Doughty as new directors of the company.

Joy has been a consultant for Itica for a number of years and previously held CIO and IT director positions in a number of blue-chip organisations. Doughty has over 20 years' experience in the social housing sector and was previously a director at Orchard.

Itica also announced that it is planning to release a series of new business intelligence services over the next few

months, the first of which will measure tenants' experiences of the end-to-end quality and performance of any digital housing service.

Neville Brown, founder and managing director, Itica, said, "I am delighted to have Martin and John alongside me to drive the next stage of Itica's development and look forward to building on our reputation for delivering business value to our housing customers."



LOVING YOUR DATA

Greg Dean, Housing Sector Sales Manager, Phoenix Software

It's estimated that the total amount of data in the world doubles every two years and that by 2020, the amount of information in existence will be 45 zettabytes – that's 45 trillion gigabytes. To put that another way, if all of that information was stored on 128Gb iPads, you would need to build a stack of them reaching from the Earth to the Moon, six times!

Where to begin?

To start making sense of data, housing providers must master the art of data transformation. This is the process of converting a raw data source into a cleansed, validated and ready-to-use form that can deliver timely insights. Appropriately transformed data is accessible, consistent, secure and seen as a trustworthy source by the intended user.

With the ever-growing volume of data available to you, you have a great opportunity to use it to find new business value. Yet harnessing this data requires a conscientious data transformation strategy that orients the data around the needs of your organisation and its users.

Achieving data transformation

To achieve data transformation, you need to have the correct pieces in place and this starts with three things: how you can store your data; how to keep that data secure; and then how to unlock the value

of your data with things such as artificial intelligence, the internet of things and business intelligence.

Where and how to store your data

As data growth continues to explode, the complexity and cost to store and manage data is becoming increasingly compounded by cyber threats and the scrutiny of regulators. The key considerations regarding where and how to store your data are:

- Further consolidation of functions;
- Greater simplicity in product design;
- Better data management;
- Leveraging of workflow-enabling technologies;
- Preventative measures;
- 'Hardening' of data.

Keeping your data secure

Employees work while they travel, contractors work remotely anywhere in the world and sensitive data can be easily downloaded from the company network. The risks of data loss grow with more and more people working outside your network, yet by following a few examples of best practice you can manage those risks.

You need to address how to best keep your data safe, your business compliant and your end-users productive yet secure by addressing the following criteria:

- Assessing just how secure your data actually is;
- How to build your plan;
- Putting your plan into action.

Unlocking the value of your data

According to Gartner, up to 49 per cent of CIOs are either not interested or have no plans around AI, yet this is expected to change as they see that 20 per cent of the remaining CIOs will have implemented AI into their back office within the next three years.

One exciting aspect about AI is that many AI suppliers already offer solutions to improve business-process tasks commonly delivered by staff within operations or back-office departments. This means looking at the following:

- Virtual assistants;
- Deep learning;
- Machine learning;
- Natural-language processing;
- Robotic process automation, cognitive computing and/or AI tools.

An organisation's data is now recognised as one its most vital assets. Therefore, it's essential to understand the importance of data and how it can deliver real business benefits back to your organisation.

Greg Dean is the housing sector sales manager for Phoenix Software.

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION – THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Nick Pike, Regional VP for UK & Northern Europe, OutSystems

Citizens have come to expect a certain level of digital interaction with all organisations, including public sector ones. From council tax payments to parking permits, refuse collection to street lighting, public sector organisations interact with the majority of the population in many different ways. As digital technologies continue to permeate our daily lives, the challenges and opportunities presented by such technologies are forcing local and national bodies to adapt to this trend towards digital transformation.

Today, housing providers and local councils are not only tasked with doing more with less money, they must also meet increasing digital demands from 'tech-savvy' tenants and citizens. Indeed, the era of digital transformation gives them the opportunity to use new technologies to move more services online, which will in turn help to deliver greater operating efficiencies while meeting the demands placed upon them.

Although there are inherent challenges in digital transformation, public sector organisations can begin to make lasting changes, but this doesn't have to be a 'big bang' approach. This can be done in incremental steps within a larger digital transformation programme to gain support and buy-in from other stakeholders around the organisation.

For example, Worcestershire County Council together with OutSystems delivered its first live app within just eight weeks as part of a larger digital transformation initiative to take its services online, which the council estimates saved around £1.6 million in one year. The council hopes that by continuing its goal of getting 100 per cent of its services delivered online, the organisation can achieve genuine

channel shift, thereby cutting its costs and making interaction easier for citizens.

What's stifling digital transformation?

That said, there are many challenges that housing providers and local councils face when embarking on digital transformation, all of which start with internal approval and end with a long-term outlook. These challenges can include:

- **Funding:** Finding the necessary funding to start a new project is always difficult. That said, when budget allocations are spent on new, more efficient digital technologies, long-term costs are then reduced for manual processes. And while public sector budgets can be challenged by a myriad of political pressures, the opportunity to innovate is game changing if they can get the funding to work on new digital initiatives.
- **Shorter timeframes:** Public sector budgets are often tied with political cycles, which means that new projects must show results quickly. As mentioned earlier, we were able to deliver an app in eight weeks for Worcestershire County Council so if approached correctly, shorter timeframes needn't be an insurmountable hurdle.
- **System issues:** Many public sector organisations have legacy systems that need replacing. This is directly related to the first two challenges. When a public sector organisation is preparing to replace a system, digital capabilities should be included in the system refresh.

The benefits of digital transformation

Although numerous challenges can make it difficult to start a digital transformation initiative, the opportunity for greater efficiencies and growth

justifies the journey. Here are 10 benefits of digital transformation within the public sector:

- Better ability to meet customer expectations;
- Increased cross-collaboration between departments;
- Greater agility within IT to meet the business needs;
- Improved competitive positioning within the market;
- More innovation across the business;
- Faster strategic decision-making;
- Increased business growth;
- Faster time to productivity in core areas;
- Reduced costs of doing business;
- Reduced IT costs.

If public sector organisations can obtain the required internal support, as well as gain the much needed funding and showcase a positive RoI, then they will be able to readily make improvements that will yield short-term operating efficiencies and lay the groundwork for long-term success.

Achieving a few quick wins early on will help to gain the momentum that is needed for the long-term process of digitally transforming your organisation. This is exactly what Worcestershire County Council did and the benefits have literally transformed the way the council operates today.

Nick Pike is the regional vice-president for the UK & Northern Europe at OutSystems.

MHS HOMES MOVES TO MHR



MHS Homes has reported how it moved to a digital HR system during the summer of 2018. The housing provider's 'My Space' is built on MHR's (formerly Midland HR) platform and enables MHS staff to book annual leave, check holiday balances, submit and see overtime, mileage and expense claims, update their personal details and see pay slips.

Colin McCarthy, human resources manager, MHS Homes, said, "This is about empowering our staff to manage their holiday, personal details and claims wherever they are, whenever they want to.

"Before our introduction of MHR, remote and mobile staff would often have to rely on their managers to book holidays. They were also tied to having to print claim forms and fill them out by hand before taking them into the office.

"We now have a much smoother, paper-free online process. We're still getting used to using it and although there are still some things to iron out, we're very pleased that all of our staff are now benefitting from this process."

Stonewater partners with MHR for payroll & HR



Stonewater has completed an extensive upgrade programme of its HR and payroll functions using software from MHR.

Jenny Sawyer, HR director, Stonewater, said, "Faced with a

tough economy and continuing welfare reform, it's essential that we maximise the value of our resources and adopt more digital methods of working in order to drive efficiency savings.

"We inherited multiple legacy systems following the merger [of Raglan and Jephson Housing in 2015], and it was clear that we needed a major overhaul of our HR processes to support our short- and long-term strategic aims. We wanted to improve our digital functionality, with greater efficiency through systems which were less labour intensive and cheaper to maintain and support."

MHR carried out a strategic review of Stonewater's HR and payroll systems to identify which areas of the housing provider's HR department could be optimised via its web-based iTrent and outsourced payroll services. This included the digitalisation and automation of core work streams as part of Stonewater's move towards a 'digital by default' model and 'always on' culture.

Following the review, MHR began a three-phase transformation programme in November 2015. The first phase went live in 2016 with the migration of Stonewater's staff from its previous legacy system to iTrent and a single payroll software package, together with the introduction of new costing rules around the implementation of Microsoft Dynamics for the finance department, and the introduction of a new Business Objects reporting system.

The second phase of Stonewater's transformation programme went live in 2017, centred on improving data security and digitising employee-centric functions such as online recruitment, employee on-boarding, and learning and development.

The final phase of the development, to be introduced at the end of 2018 and during early 2019, will include the introduction of best practice processes for contract variations and the automation of key HR processes for absences, attendance, discipline and grievances.

Sawyer said, "MHR's iTrent is now the engine of our HR department, enabling our staff and managers to have the control, accurate reporting and the visibility they need while letting our workforce take greater ownership of their work through self-service functionality.

"Consistent and streamlined digital processes across all areas of HR and payroll have reduced the amount of labour-intensive, manual work, resulting in more value-adding activities. For example, automation of our payroll process has greatly reduced the number of people needed to carry out manual corrections and calculate post-payroll costings. Meanwhile, the adoption of modern recruitment and training methods means we can improve the experience of applicants and employees, increasing our ability to attract and retain the best talent."

BT'S BRUNKARD JOINS ACCENT



Accent has appointed Philip Brunkard, a senior BT consultant, as a non-executive director on its newly formed customer experience committee.

Philip Brunkard, CIO for regional government and health, BT, said, "I'm really looking forward to working with my new colleagues to deliver Accent's key objectives around fantastic service and new homes, which will help Accent make its mark in responding to the housing crisis, and ensuring it remains a caring, ambitious and innovative organisation with tenants at the heart of everything it does."

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