The Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association

“Twenty First Century Government is enabled by technology – policy is inspired by it, business change is delivered by it, customer and corporate services are dependent on it, and democratic engagement is exploring it. Moreover modern governments with serious transformational intent see technology as a strategic asset and not just a tactical tool. Technology alone does not transform government, but government cannot transform to meet modern citizens’ expectations without it.”

“Transformational Government”
HM Government Cabinet Office publication

Housing associations and social landlords have a responsibility for delivering good quality, affordable housing. As organisations, they can reap the same benefits as private sector companies from the use of technology, with the network as the platform for organisational transformation.

The concept of Cisco’s strategy recognises that consumers, or end users of services, are the primary drivers of change within organisations. It is compelling organisations to provide highly personalised customer experiences, using innovative virtual networked business models, that allow consumers to access information and services from any screen or any device, at any time. For Housing Associations, this means that the needs and expectations of tenants are at the top of the agenda. This same key factor is also the principal goal of compliance with local authority targets and regulations. Technology is transforming the capabilities of Housing Associations in addressing these demands, helping to improve services, boost efficiencies and ensure robust accountability.

The Network as the Platform for Business Transformation Summary
The Twenty First Century Housing Association will be transformed by the use of technology. Organisations will be able to offer greater choice and deeper personalisation of services. They will be more flexible and better able to achieve the standards of provision and service they seek, while their staff will be freed up from paperwork and empowered to deliver real value to tenants and residents.
Every Housing Association now has an opportunity to assess past investments in technology and develop strategies to drive real benefits from them. The Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association will be one that has transformed its relationships with tenants through convenient, consistent customer interaction, cost-effective, customer-centric services and greater empowerment and involvement of its tenants and residents. It will also have transformed internal processes with greater employee productivity and optimised processes that eliminate silos of separated services and resources. Finally, it will have taken partnership working to a new level, allocating tasks to the most appropriate party in a series of tightly knit relationships that enable the different partners to function as one Virtual Networked Organisation.

**21st Century Networked Housing Association – Cisco’s Vision for Social Housing**

“Connecting customers, employees, community-based organisations and suppliers by combining technology with new processes to offer more effective services, improve standards of living, provide a safe environment whilst driving economic and social development.”

The five key elements of the Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association Vision are:

- **Networked Residents / Citizens** – this encompasses the actual delivery of services and the way residents interact with the association.
- **Networked Employees** – introducing new ways of working, including mobility, cost-reductions and the optimisation of existing resources.
- **The Networked Organisation** – delivering tangible and sustainable benefits to Housing Associations, in terms of efficiency and enhanced collaboration across a rich canvas of applications and solutions, such as IP telephony, or instant messaging systems.
- **Networked Partners** – bringing other councils, key suppliers and commercial partners into the process, transforming the way the association and its strategic partners interact, collaborate and deliver value.
- **Networked Buildings** – the development of intelligent buildings, that understand who the occupants are and what services they require.

This vision involves transforming every aspect of the way a Housing Association operates, with the network as the key enabler. Cisco® provides proven, industry-leading strategies and technologies that support this vision. Its ICT Architecture for Social Housing defines standards for integrating ICT infrastructure, interactive services and applications across an organisation. It incorporates standards for the selection of servers, applications software and storage, and their secure deployment in tiered data centres. It also includes disaster recovery mechanisms that automatically back up data across multiple data centres, as well as standard user desktops and the ability to manage patching and security for all staff automatically. And it enables a converged corporate network, with LAN, WAN, voice, wireless and remote access capabilities all integrated into a single, easily-managed infrastructure.

At the heart of the Cisco® concept is the Service-Oriented Network Architecture (SONA). This is an environment where computing and storage resources no longer have a direct connection to the applications and organisations they serve. Instead, they are available as virtualised resources, or services that are accessible either internally or externally via the network. In this scenario the network itself is not seen as a resource, but as a means of accessing the resources and services required to deliver the organisational strategy. The Cisco SONA provides organisations with the common, intelligent and flexible platform that allows them to get maximum value from their IT investments.
challenge

With the increasing demand for housing, particularly in the South and South East of England, housing associations face a growing challenge: the need to drive down costs and improve efficiencies, while offering their tenants – their customers – new, or improved services. This is a challenge faced by every organisation, whether it is in the public or private sector. The pace of change and the need for rigorous control of spending means that they must do more with less, extracting maximum productivity and value from existing resources, while continuing to meet the rising expectations of the residents they serve.

The Government’s Agenda

The Government Spending Review for 2004 showed that Housing Associations have achieved good results. However, the sector will need to demonstrate that gains made by Housing Associations, their customers and stakeholders will also benefit government. Among the Government’s top priorities are savings and efficiencies achieved through the use of technology, and the sharing of best practices. The key areas of focus will be:

- Effectiveness must be seen to be as important as efficiency in any strategic objectives and measures associated with them.
- There must be a ‘sharing’ approach to the resources created by efficiency and effectiveness improvements, which in turn can be demonstrated to the audit commission, Housing Corporation and government.
- The awareness that, with all the drives for efficiency and productivity, there must always be a positive experience for the tenants, residents and the community as a whole.

solution

Cisco, and its Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), has years of experience within private and public sector organisations, and a track record of delivering effective solutions for public sector customers on every continent. The IBSG team has developed the concept of the Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association as its vision for the future. The modular architecture of the concept provides a clear way forward for Housing Associations who may already have implemented some elements of the concept. It shows how disparate elements can be integrated into a universal whole, within a development strategy that may take many years to execute. The key factor is that the process is underpinned by a clear understanding of the ultimate goals.

This is not a transformation that will take place overnight. It is, however, one that is manageable, practical and sustainable. It is also flexible, allowing for the introduction of relevant new technologies as they become available, and for shifts in political priorities that call for the reallocation of the services and resources made accessible by the infrastructure.

Five core concepts provide the foundation for the vision of the Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association. The first and most important of these is the idea of the Networked Tenant or Resident.

Every directive, policy and guideline emanating from government and independent researchers places the resident at the heart of an effective solution to the challenges facing Housing Associations and social landlords. The logic is exactly the same as the customer-centric solutions developed for the private sector. If you begin with your most important element – the resident/customer – you can build back through the organisation and its partners to arrive at an efficient, customer-centric ecosystem that supports the delivery of effective, sustainable solutions aligned completely with the needs and expectations of the end-user.
Networked Residents/Citizens

Networked residents are individuals that can interact with their local Housing Association across multiple channels, in ways that are the most convenient for them. The Customer Interaction Network may encompass anything from websites and call centres, to booths on estates and improved access to services for residents actually visiting the Association’s premises. The key is that the services are easily accessible via channels that are easy to use.

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The experience of dealing with the Housing Association is enriched by the fact that whatever channel is chosen for the communication, the internal view of the resident or customer is consistent – no more endless referrals to different departments, each of which requires a repeated explanation of the issue in question. Residents can have faster access to correct information, leading to the faster resolution of problems or queries.

Customer-centric services are services that are developed from the resident’s perspective and in response to clearly articulated needs and expectations. For example, where home visits are required, Housing Association employees can be equipped with laptops or PDAs that connect via wireless broadband links to the headquarters infrastructure, enabling them to find information and answers quickly. With this kind of technology, many queries or problems can be resolved on the spot, instead of requiring multiple visits or additional work when the employee returns to the office.

E-accessible services can make vast resources available to residents via websites, kiosks and contact centres, speeding up the processes involved in a huge range of activities. Housing applications, for example, may involve many different departments – housing, finance, legal and others – all of which can be reached through a single online portal. Services can even be made pro-active, sending alerts to residents when there is progress with any issue they have raised with the association, or offering new services relevant to their specific needs.

These processes also drive cost-efficiency, helping residents to find the communications channels that work best for them, and directing the expertise within the Housing Association to where it is most productive. Time and effort are stripped out of the process of resolving even minor issues, making life easier both for residents and Housing Association employees. The result is a greater empowerment of the resident served by the association, with a greater sense of involvement that feeds back into decision-making, leading to even greater improvements in service development and delivery. The more involved your residents are, the more relevant your services become, leading to an even greater sense of involvement and belonging – and so the virtuous circle develops.

To give full expression to the concept of the Networked Resident, Housing Associations must embrace the idea of the Networked Organisation. This is made up of the four other foundational elements of the Cisco Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association: the Networked Employee, the Networked Organisation, Networked Partners and Networked Buildings.
Networked Employees

The idea of the Networked Employee incorporates a rich blend of functions and benefits, encompassing both the specifics of operational working and the culture of the organisation itself. A move towards more home working, for example, can help to improve employee retention and recruitment, and to boost productivity. Advanced communication and collaboration tools, such as instant messaging and videoconferencing, can accelerate cycle times for the development and delivery of services, while e-enabled learning can dramatically reduce the cost of training, both in terms of expenditure and time away from the office.

Networked Organisation

Driving the development of the Networked Employee is the concept of the Networked Organisation. Here, the network enables processes to be optimised across the whole council rather than just within particular departments. This applies to business processes and to infrastructure. The convergence of voice, data and video services – such as CCTV – onto a single IP-based network can eliminate substantial operational and capital expenditures, while the standardisation of platforms across departments can simplify network management and generate still more cost-efficiencies.

Networked services such as storage – a critical issue with the proliferation of information – security, and measures for disaster recovery and organisational continuity, can all be extended across the infrastructure. They can also be managed from a single, central source. This kind of optimised, ubiquitous infrastructure drives rapid, better-informed decision making, that enables faster and more focused service delivery. In addition, the use of rich media, such as audio and video, enhances collaboration and communication, both internally and with residents, improving understanding, and eliminating notions of “us and them” that can create tensions and dissatisfaction.

Security is a crucial aspect of this approach. Today’s intelligent, intuitive security solutions, exemplified by the Cisco concept of the Self-Defending Network, build security into the fabric of the network, and can simplify management of the most complex and distributed architectures. Security therefore becomes an enabler for new services, rather than a barrier to deployment, allowing organisations to extend the full productive power of the network to its furthest endpoints.

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Networked Partners

This capability is crucial for the move towards Networked Partners, in which the processes of other Housing Associations, key suppliers and other partners are joined into a seamless whole. As with departments within the Housing Association, standardisation and collaboration between external organisations can reduce costs and speed-up cycle times for all parties, ultimately leading to the improved delivery of services to the Networked Resident. There are also potential savings and improvements to be made through the outsourcing of key services to specialist organisations – such as maintenance and contact centres – with management and control of these partners made easy by the integrated infrastructure. It is even possible to facilitate direct interaction between Networked Residents and Networked Partners, improving service delivery, reducing costs and lifting the burden of intermediate administration from the Housing Association.
For example, where maintenance services are outsourced to a third party, the tenant can go online through the Housing Association’s portal and raise a case that is automatically logged on the provider’s system. The provider can acknowledge the request, and the tenant can track progress directly, without the intervention of the Housing Association team. At the same time, however, the case is logged in the Association’s own records, allowing a prompt and informed response if intervention is required at a later date. This kind of capability allows simple, effective compliance with service level agreements, both between the Association and its tenants, and between the provider and the Association. But above all, it optimises the delivery of service to the end-user – the tenant – which is the primary strategic priority for the Association.

Networked Buildings

With the development of Networked Buildings, Housing Associations can extend the value and benefits of the ICT infrastructure across all of their built assets. Networked Buildings are intelligent structures that know who their occupants are, and what their needs are in terms of services and resources. All of these services are provided across the same IP-network, ranging from security, asset protection and access privileges, to intelligent and dynamic heating, lighting and multimedia services. Remote management and monitoring of the assets can save substantial sums and help to prevent problems as well as remedy them. In addition, Networked Buildings can be more energy efficient and have lower carbon footprints.

The Cisco network is the platform that makes all this possible. Today’s organisational infrastructures can drive enhanced IT and process optimisation, delivering capabilities that are fully aligned with the strategic needs of the organisations they serve. They enable and support the advanced applications and service delivery requirements that drive strategy and deliver the organisational goals.

For organisations implementing the concept of the Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association, Cisco networks provide the foundation for a Service Oriented Network Architecture. This is an architecture where computing and storage resources are not allocated directly to the applications they serve, but are available as virtualised services, accessible both within and outside the organisation, via the network. In this scenario, resources can be dynamically provisioned to meet changing or new service requirements. The concept of the network shifts from being a resource in its own right; to a means of accessing resources and services which themselves are no longer dedicated assets. They are available on demand to whoever needs them, whenever and wherever they are needed.

The idea of the Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association is not an absolute solution for all organisations. Nor is it a fixed technological path, based on proprietary standards. It is genuinely a vision, a collection of ideas that show how Housing Associations can work in the future, even with the financial and political pressures that are the inevitable realities of local government. It is a concept designed to bring about a revolution in thinking about the way housing services are structured and delivered, which recognises that networking technology has the capability to bring about a radical transformation.
It envisages the development of truly customer-centric services that reach empowered and involved residents. These services are delivered by highly productive and motivated employees, working for organisations that enjoy continuous, large-scale efficiency gains. These are made possible through unified, optimised organisational processes and effective partnerships, making the idea of joined-up community a practical reality.

“The National Housing Federation has been working with Cisco over the last 3 years to help develop the 21st Century Networked Housing Association. This initiative will ensure that every Federation member can communicate more effectively with their residents, thereby establishing a stronger sense of involvement and community, and empowering tenants to take more control over their quality of life. Our 1300 members can work with National Housing Association affinity partners to substantially reduce their operational costs whilst increasing the levels of care, services and resources to more and more people.”

George Grant - Head of Alliances at The National Housing Federation.

Yet this vision is not an intangible piece of blue-sky thinking. It is founded on proven, stable technologies that are working now for today’s Housing Associations. There are countless examples of key elements of the concept that are in place and delivering dramatic results for Associations across the UK and social housing organisations around the world. Every element of the Twenty First Century Networked Housing Association is there. It simply requires the commitment of a visionary organisation to bring them all together and show that in terms of technology-enabled transformation the public sector can match - or even exceed - the best of the private sector.