

## Case Study Helena Housing

**Helena Housing builds strategy for success with solution from OPENHousing.**

### The background

Helena Housing is a housing association with 13,500 homes in St Helens, Merseyside. The organisation was formed in July 2002 when St Helens Council transferred its council house stock into the organisation's ownership. Its Board of Directors is voluntary and comprises four local councillors, four tenants and four independent board members. Helena Housing employs over 550 people.



Following the stock transfer in 2002, Helena Housing needed to introduce a number of business processes and IT systems to enable it to run effectively and efficiently as an organisation in its own right. One of the most urgent requirements was to implement a financial system and a housing IT solution to manage the core business, as the systems used previously were owned by the Local Authority and due to be switched off in January 2003.

In order to go about selecting a provider to implement these systems, Helena Housing undertook a review of the marketplace.

This review sought to select solution providers which would assist Helena Housing in its quest to meet the various challenges it faces as an organisation now and in the coming years.

### The challenge

For example, key challenges facing Helena Housing include ensuring that all of its homes comply with the decent homes standard by 2009 through delivery of an ambitious £270 million programme of improvements across its housing stock - a lofty target which requires robust processes and IT systems on which to deliver improvements effectively.

Furthermore, during its first two years of operation, the number of homes Helena Housing manages has fallen due to a rise in tenants exercising their right-to-buy and the demolition of a number of properties that are no longer viable. Falling stock numbers present significant challenges, not least because access to capital grant funding is limited. St Helens is not considered to be a priority area for such funding therefore it needs to seek more creative opportunities to comply with initiatives such as the Gershon review and, build financial strength and maintain reputation.

### The solution

The quest to find a solution provider and partner to assist Helena Housing in meeting these challenges resulted in two companies being short-listed - IBS OPENSsystems and Orchard Information Systems.

**Cath O'Neill, Head of Business Improvement and Technology at Helena Housing commented:**

"IBS was selected based on a number of factors. The first was that IBS was the only company on the market which could provide an effective contractor management system in addition to its core housing and financial solutions. The management reporting in this product was fundamental to Helena Housing's objective to benchmark, manage and improve efficiencies across its operations. Secondly, Helena Housing was impressed by the overall approach of the IBS team and recommendations from established customers."

Following a four month implementation, the IBS OPENFinancials solution, coupled with accounts payable and stores in Contractor + went live on transfer day, 1st July 2003. Six months later, The OPENHousing and DLO functions of Contractor + went live for 350 users. This was in line with the switching off of the Local Authority's system.

## Lessons learned

The urgency to implement a solution so quickly after the stock transfer meant that the project had been implemented back-to-front.

*Cath O'Neill explains: "Rather than streamlining processes and then supporting these processes with an IT solution, the IT solution was implemented to lead the project. A lack of IT skills internally meant that training and subsequent user take-up of the system was delayed and benefits were slow to emerge. However six to eight months on from the go-live, we started to see the benefits in terms of increased efficiencies and a more productive workforce to help meet our efficiency agendas. However the real cost savings as a result of the wider IBS solution were yet to come."*

## The next stage - OPENContractor

Following the 'bedding in' of the financials and housing management solutions at the end of December 2003, Helena Housing set about implementing OPENContractor.

*Cath O'Neill continues: "Having learned valuable lessons from the previous project, Helena Housing was keen to ensure that implementation of the OPENContractor solution followed a programme of change management. We kicked off a process streamlining and re-engineering programme to pave the way for the OPENContractor solution. Taking this more proactive approach meant that the go-live was delayed until December 2004, however once implemented the benefits emerged very quickly."*

## The benefits

Within just two weeks of OPENContractor going live, what Helena Housing terms 'Priority 3' jobs had reached a completion rate of 94% from a previous average of 60-70%. That total soon reached 98% and is now sustained at that level on an ongoing basis.

OPENContractor also enabled Helena Housing to proactively offer customer appointments - a service which was previously impossible to deliver. This service was offered from April 1st 2005.

OPENContractor also means that Helena Housing can better manage the workflow of ticketing to enable Just-In-Time production of tickets. This approach has already resulted in Helena Housing over-achieving in its performance indicators as well as contributing to the organisation's efficiency savings against Gershon targets and annual efficiency statements.

## The future

Helena Housing is currently piloting handheld devices amongst its workforce which will reduce completion costs by 60% and increase productivity by 5% through reduced data entry and fewer visits to and from the main depot. In turn this also means

that fuel costs and environmental emissions are reduced. The pilot is due for completion at the end of 2005 with a view to it being rolled out to the wider organisation in 2006.

Another future development is a joint project with Helena Housing's Local Authority. In order to respond to the agenda that by 2008 all Registered Social Landlords, Local Authorities and Housing Associations must offer choice in their lettings practices, Helena Housing is talking to IBS about its Choice Based Lettings module. Through sharing procurement, management and running costs with its Local Authority, economies of scale can be realised and greater efficiencies achieved in complying with the agenda.

*Cath O'Neill summarises Helena Housing's relationship with IBS: "Since we started working with IBS in 2002, our relationship has gone from strength to strength. The functionality of the solution is second to none and is unrivalled by any other product currently on the market. But our successes go far beyond that. The IBS team always listens to our feedback and unlike many organisations, they act upon this feedback to improve the products and shape the functionality we derive from them. IBS is a key partner in our mission to achieve ongoing efficiencies, comply with the many agendas which engulf us and boost our reputation as a leading Housing Association in the UK."*

OPENHousing, OPENContractor and OPENFinancials solutions, formerly from IBS OPENSystems, now belong to Capita Software Solutions.

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