







Making the Internet work for residents and their landlords

The Government has set targets for public bodies to deliver services online within five years, and is concerned that everyone that wants access to the Internet should have it through public or private provision. Partnerships Online examined the practicalities for housing associations and residents, found that progress is slow, and offers some insights and ways forward. Drawing on exploratory work, online forums and workshops with housing association residents and staff, the study found:

-  Housing associations could use information and communication technologies to deliver on three fronts: providing online services, supporting community development, and providing residents with learning and job opportunities.
-  However, most housing associations are doing relatively little in this field. Research suggests this is partly because of lack of vision, lack of skilled staff and funding and the need for organisational culture change. It may also be because the benefits of introducing new technology are not evident or easily realisable.
-  Forecasts suggest that by 2007 there will be many 'smart' homes, public services will increasingly be online, and other communication methods may be reduced. Advocates of online services argue that social housing residents could be at a disadvantage as citizens and as consumers if they do not have access to at least some of these features.
-  Workshop discussions suggest that residents are currently concerned about costs of Internet access, are unsure of benefits, and concerned that development of online services may lead to cuts in traditional provision.
-  If housing associations do not take action, it seems unlikely other solutions will readily emerge without new partnerships. The public and non-profit sectors are generally not performing strongly in this field. Commercial organisations will only go for profitable market sectors. Most residents will find it challenging to develop 'DIY' solutions.
-  There is currently no forum for these issues. The researchers suggest the development of 'communities of practice' for those housing association staff and residents willing to explore the complex issues in this field.

Background

The project's starting-point was the assumption that housing associations would be well placed and keen to develop information and other services online, and also help residents take advantage of the wider opportunities offered by the Internet.

The brief was to develop and test a 'toolkit' for action based on the researchers' previous work with community groups, government-supported UK online centres and online community networks. However, the project found little potential demand for such practical advice, and so undertook an analysis of why that might be. In the event, it seemed more appropriate to develop a 'thinking kit' or guide to help landlords and residents work through the complexities involved in online systems.

Is the Internet really important?

The researchers identified three levels at which housing associations could, potentially, develop initiatives:

1. Delivery of services online: reporting repairs, negotiating exchanges, general assistance.
2. Support for resident-related activities online: integrating with resident participation programmes.
3. Enabling residents to use the Internet to pursue their learning, work or personal interests.

Few associations are engaged at level 1; still fewer at 2 or 3. Some residents have developed their own community-wide information and communication systems to meet these and other needs. However, this DIY approach seems unlikely to develop rapidly without funding, technical and organisational support.

A more general review of community and civic use of the Internet, undertaken by the researchers, suggests that being online will in future be essential for all organisations – and many individuals – as the Internet becomes as much a part of day-to-day life as the telephone.

The review showed, however, that local authorities and community and voluntary organisations – as well as housing associations – were having difficulty developing online facilities.

While there is increasing personal take-up of Internet access through PCs and other devices, this will not in itself ensure that appropriate information and services are available, or that residents,

community groups, housing associations and other organisations in the field have the confidence and commitment to use new communication methods effectively.

Why isn't much happening?

One possible conclusion from the above is that housing associations should 'try harder' and take the lead in helping to get their residents connected and use the Internet. However, this may be simplistic.

On the one hand experience in all sectors shows that blundering in to new technology without a clear strategy and plans for change could produce more problems and expense than it saves in benefits. Landlords and residents will need training and support to help avoid this. Introducing new technology often merely throws up old organisational problems. In order to reap the benefits of the Internet, housing associations will need to work closely with residents; train staff and Boards; recruit specialists; reorganise systems.

On the other hand it may be that housing associations and residents are not enthusiastic about the technology because it doesn't very evidently offer major benefits solely in their roles as landlords and residents. Where innovative developments are taking place it is often in partnership with other agencies, and this may be the most fruitful way forward.

What is happening to the technology?

As part of the research, David Greenop looked into likely use of new technologies in five years' time. In summary, he suggested:

- There will be lots of devices, networks and content available to those able to afford and use technology: desktop and laptop computers, digital TVs, hand-held computers, mobile phones (and combinations of these), plus games machines, and even fridges connected to the Internet.
- Different age and interest groups will be using technology in different ways – some at home, some on the move. One solution won't fit all.
- There will be big differences in 'connectedness' between those who have personal and homes technologies networked together, and those using community access facilities. There may be 'smart' homes with a wealth of devices, 'media-rich' homes mainly equipped for entertainment, and 'dumb' homes with slow, limited Internet access, if any.

- Commercial providers are unlikely to see social housing residents or social landlords as a significant market. There appear to be no Government-led infrastructure initiatives that would make a significant difference to this.

The balance of benefits and barriers

A workshop with the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust showed that both residents and staff were sceptical about 'technology for technology's sake'. The general feeling was that there might be some potential in the use of new technologies, but that benefits would have to be very clear for both residents and JRHT for any developments to be considered. In particular, residents would need to feel that the technology added to the existing over the counter, print or telephone-based services.

The particular benefits and barriers identified from workshop discussions and research covered the three areas above: services; resident-related activities; personal benefits. They included:

Potential benefits for residents

Services will be more readily available for those online; groups and individuals can benefit from information, improved communication, collaboration and lobbying online, as well as new opportunities for learning. Online networks can help build a stronger sense of community.

Potential barriers or disadvantages for residents

Residents may not understand – or be confident about – the technology and possible benefits. Computers and the Internet simply may not be a priority for residents on low incomes.

Residents were also concerned that the development of online services may mean reduction in other services; that associations might develop systems without significant resident involvement which may not meet their needs.

Possible benefits for associations

The Internet potentially offers enhanced delivery of services and/or reduced costs in the long term. It can provide additional means of consultation and communication as part of resident participation. Computers and the Internet can make a contribution to wider objectives of community development and capacity building.

The barriers or disadvantages for associations

Most senior managers don't understand the technology, and introducing technology requires changes in organisational culture.

There is a perception that the majority of residents are currently not interested in using new technology. The benefits in efficiency or effectiveness are uncertain in the short term, while the additional staffing needed will cost money and require organisational change.

Making the Internet work for both residents and landlords

The biggest problem the research found is that very few people in the social housing field have the background, training or peer support to understand these issues. It simply hasn't been their business.

The researchers suggest that the first step for national organisations in the field should be to establish networks to increase understanding, develop models for thinking and action, and share the lessons learned. These 'communities of practice' could use a mixture of communication methods, but should certainly be online, with the necessary support for that. Networks for both residents and housing associations, drawing on a range of knowledge and experience both within and outside the housing field, are likely to be needed.

Conclusion and possible action

The researchers conclude that the development of online services and facilities is likely to be slow and patchy. While this may not appear important in the short term, failure to plan developments now may close opportunities later. New technologies are likely to be important to residents and housing associations in their personal, organisational and specifically housing roles. The challenges in introducing them are about more than wires and PCs or interactive TVs. They are about providing content and applications appropriate to the needs of the resident users and the landlord. Delivery involves infrastructure, access to devices, training, support, content development and management.

The study's main conclusion is that - to be effective - information and communications technologies (ICTs) need to be integrated with other communication methods, and the ways of working of individuals, groups and organisations. In addition, the researchers suggest that housing associations need to:

- make provision for cabling in new or rehabilitation projects;
- extend staff training in the use of new technologies beyond standard office uses;
- integrate development of online services with other methods;
- support residents' organisations with community access, advice and training;
- look for partnerships with other agencies.

The main recommendation is that systems should be designed with informed users – both staff and residents. The first step towards that is to help users better understand the potential of ICTs for themselves, their family or their organisation. The researchers developed some workshop 'games' for this, linked to planning tools.

About the project

This research was undertaken by David Wilcox and colleagues of Partnerships Online. They have pioneered work on community participation in new technologies since the mid-1990s, including their joint US-UK project Making the Net Work.

Drew Mackie designed the workshops; David Greenop provided the 2007 foresight report; David Brake undertook additional research.

The research drew on an online forum for more than 60 practitioners in the field, and ran several workshops with members of this group to gather and test lessons, insights and models. Workshops were also run with the residents and staff of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust; with the Carpenters Estate Wired Up Community project; and the Family Housing Association Tenants Forum.

Observations about relative lack of progress in the field drew upon other parallel research for the Housing Corporation, **Remote control**, being undertaken by Martyn Pearl; it is hoped that this initial work on the toolkit, and ideas for a 'community of practice', will contribute to the next stage of that project.

How to get further information

The guide and website that accompany these *Findings* report the research more fully, and offer some stories, models and ideas for thinking about new technologies. The guide highlights lessons learned elsewhere, plus a 'game' to help associations and residents start to plan ways forward, even if they are unfamiliar with the technology. The website can be found at <http://www.makingthenetwork.org/housing>. The guide, **Making the net work for residents and their landlords: A guide to using information and communication technologies in housing associations** by David Wilcox with David Greenop and Drew Mackie, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 113 6, price £13.95).

Remote control: Housing associations and e-governance, by M. Pearl and M. Scanlon, 2002, is published by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 398 1, price £14.99).