

The technology test

Finding the right IT solution for your organisation can be a minefield. Lydia Stockdale discovers how it can be done

Procuring technology can be 'like being a kid in a sweet shop,' says Peter Fitzhenry, director of housing management at Warrington-based housing association Golden Gates Housing Trust.

In the weeks running up to this technology special issue, Inside Housing has been bombarded with information about new software developments and web-based tools, all of which, their producers claim, can save amazing amounts of time and money.

Tracy Harrison, marketing manager at the Northern Housing Consortium, which is running its annual housing and IT exhibition, Hitex, in four locations in England and Wales later this year, says there's 'a big growth in the number of IT companies focusing on the housing sector' over recent years.

Presuming IT and procurement managers are also contacted by these companies how do they decide between them?

'The most common reason buying software off the shelf fails is poorly defined requirements,' explains Martin Tate, founder of technology procurement consultancy, IT Evaluation. 'Before you go shopping, you must have a shopping list.'

'You have to decide what you want from a corporate context, rather than being led down a path you don't want to go down,' agrees Steve Lamb, head of ICT and business process re-engineering at 8,800-home Golden Gates Housing Trust. 'Stack up the business case first. Calculate how much it costs to run a service before you buy the technology, and what the situation is going to be after.'

Administrative assistance

Virtual Boardroom, for example, is a 'secure web-based portal' which allows board members and company secretaries to share and search company documentation in order to compile packs of information for board meetings.

'The packs can be distributed to board members as sleek, hard copy documents or electronically via the portal,' says Robin Bishop, managing director of Virtual Boardroom.

Cost: Prices start from £2,000 a year. So, does it save money in the long-run? Mr Bishop gives the example of Bron Afon Community Housing, which has saved £2,468 on the production and distribution of boardroom materials this year.

Housing clients: 21 including Cardiff Community Housing Association, Newlon Housing Trust and London & Quadrant.

Feedback: Lorraine Wapshott, PA to the company secretary at 66,000-home L&Q, has been using Virtual Boardroom for a year. 'Board packs used to take two days to compile; now they take half a day,' she says.

Group board and executive board attendees submit papers they want

discussed in the meeting, and they are all typed in different fonts and formats, which used to have to be fixed manually. 'Now we can click and it produces lovely packs,' Ms Wapshott explains.

Plus papers can be slotted in at the last minute and the system automatically rennumbers the pages.

'It makes our lives so much easier,' she says.

It's important to buy a program-me that is compatible with your existing software, he adds. Plus it's not a good idea to purchase technology that's overcomplicated.

Instead of making life harder, the right technology should enable housing professionals to do their jobs better. Here we focus on five types of software and web-based tools to discover whether, if chosen wisely, technology can help landlords achieve more with less. We've spoken to those responsible for IT and procurement at five organisations to find out why they decided to invest in certain pieces of kit.

But as Mr Tate and Mr Lamb point out, what works wonderfully for one organisation will not necessarily be so successful for another. It's important that landlords shop around before they hand over their money.

