

## Case Study Festival Housing Group

**West Midland housing associations collaborate to achieve efficiency savings in excess of £500,000.**

### The background

Festival Housing Group was established on 31st March 2002 following the merging of Partnership and Spa Housing in the West Midlands. The Group owns and manages 8,000 properties primarily in rural Worcestershire and Herefordshire.



Partnership Housing Group, based in Malvern and Spa Housing Group in Droitwich, merged after it was clear that there were synergies and economies of scale to be derived from providing core housing and maintenance services to the communities of each organisation. The rationale of the merger was underpinned by four key objectives. These included becoming more efficient, reducing overheads, sharing best practice and achieving a higher level of customer service.

In addition to these objectives, Festival Housing faced a number of performance-related challenges.

### The challenge

The National Housing Federation (NHF) iN business for neighbourhoods initiative aims to change the poor image of housing associations and provide a better perception of those who live and work in the sector. It is driven by the fact that Housing Associations need to develop innovative ways of providing services more effectively to customers, neighbourhoods and stakeholders.

The challenge for Festival Housing is to achieve this initiative against a backdrop of efficiency agendas such as Gershon.

Furthermore, Festival Housing is striving for a three star performance rating following its inspection of housing services in 2005 by the Audit Commission where a two star rating was awarded.

In addition to the efficiency and performance agendas, the Group needed to manage sustainable processes and develop core services for its customers on a single IT platform.

### The solution

Prior to the merger, Partnership and Spa Housing Group ran its core housing services on two separate IT systems. To meet their objectives as a new organisation, Festival had to select a single IT software partner. After consultation with the providers at the two sites, of which IBS OPENSys was one, IBS was selected as the preferred supplier.

**Guy Weston, Chief Executive of Festival Housing Group commented:**

"IBS was selected because we had to be confident that we would achieve our business objectives. The IT strategy was seen as a critical process in enabling this. We had to be confident that the IT partner could support our needs and provide innovative ways of delivering services to our customers. Having previously worked with IBS, we were confident that we, as a team, would achieve this".

The solution had to combine data from the two different systems from the different departments, such as rent collection and repair services.

The complex process of merging the core services of two associations on to a single IT platform meant that there was the risk of jeopardising service levels. IBS had to review what the organisations did separately and integrate the IT processes effectively with minimal disruption.

Following a phased implementation and a review of what services were provided separately and what had to be amalgamated, the core IBS OPENFinancials went live in April 2002 and OPENHousing modules went live in February 2004.

*Guy Weston explained: "It was clear that the benefits of a single IT platform for the housing and financial systems would only be realised if the two organisations and systems were brought together smoothly. IBS spent time to map and engineer the processes that were required in order to minimise disruption to our service levels. The implementation was phased and the solution was flexible to adapt to our business needs".*

## The benefits

The alliance to procure a single IT solution from IBS, has resulted in a number of benefits for the organisation. These include an improved IT infrastructure and greater efficiency of front and back office processes.

Festival has developed information systems to tackle two key problems it faces. The first was the ability to provide and support housing services in remote, rural areas. The second is to ensure that its staff can work flexibly from remote areas if needs be.

For example, one initiative has been to provide a mobile office vehicle which travels out to remote rural areas to provide services to customers. The staff are able to log in to the housing and finance system remotely and provide in real time information for customers who visit the office.

*Guy Weston commented: "One of our challenges as an organisation is to deliver a broader range of services to neighbourhoods in remote rural areas. Providing staff with the means to do this is vital for us. Through initiatives such as the mobile office, we can provide our customers with services and our staff with a more flexible way of delivering housing services. In this way, we can become more proactive and efficient as an organisation".*

## The next step - OPENContractor

Following the implementation of the financials and housing management solutions, Festival Housing Organisation has set about the roll out of OPENContractor, a works management solution. It will track the repairs and planning work of the merged housing stock more efficiently.

*Guy Weston commented: "With an amalgamated housing stock from the two organisations, managing this is crucial. We have started a phased implementation of the OPENContractor solution to record and carry out repairs and achieve greater efficiencies. We are confident that we are laying the firm foundations to support our strategy as an organisation".*

## The future

Festival is currently providing its workforce with personal digital assistants (PDAs) to record activities in "real time" without replication of effort. It will provide more effective ways of delivering works management services remotely such as recording repairs by appointment, stock condition, and work allocation.

*Guy Weston summarises Festival's relationship with IBS: "IBS has offered us the flexibility and commitment that a successful partnership demands. The target was to achieve efficiency savings of £500,000 from the merger. The reality is that we achieved greater savings than the target. IT will be a key factor in helping to drive further savings from the merger. As an organisation, we look forward to developing innovative working practices for our staff and forging strong links with communities".*

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

Please contact your Capita Housing Account Manager for further details.

2 West Mills  
Newbury  
Berkshire  
RG14 5HG

Telephone +44 (0)1635 550088  
Facsimile +44 (0)1635 550505

[cssenquiries@capita.co.uk](mailto:cssenquiries@capita.co.uk)  
[www.capita-software.co.uk](http://www.capita-software.co.uk)

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