



WHITEPAPER

ASSESSING DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS FOR HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

A New Generation of Document Management Solutions in the Social Housing Sector
Hugh Bell, Account Manager & Steve Rhodes, Systems Engineer, Invu



Whilst many Housing Associations have used some form of Document Management for some time, very few have leveraged the true power and efficiencies that are available with modern Document and Content Management systems.

Introduction

The choice of an effective Document Management (DM) solution is of fundamental importance to the efficiency and performance of the modern social housing provider. This paper attempts to highlight some of the key considerations when choosing the most effective and appropriate DM solution for a Housing Association.

Some of the key areas that merit attention for any Housing Association when assessing and planning the implementation of an effective Document Management solution are:

- The ability to extract and integrate data contained within finance documents.
- The ability to facilitate efficiencies in other departments outside of Finance e.g. Property and Tenancy Management
- The need to integrate with an often wide range of disparate legacy systems.
- The ability to build document output systems (contract of works and rent statements), that integrate with workflow and Document Management processes.

The need for integration in Finance departments

Historically, the focus for both DM suppliers and end-users has been on the provision of Document Management solutions within the finance area of an organisation. In particular, this has involved the capturing and electronic storage of supplier invoices. Implementing such systems has allowed some Housing Associations to enjoy a number of benefits. For example.:

- Full visibility and traceability of documents awaiting review and approval in the business. This leads to increased control, whilst the fact that documents are available to all parties electronically means a much quicker approval process.
- A reduction in the space required for storage of physical documents as well as the stationery and assets required to hold documentation.
- Staff can retrieve financial documents instantaneously with consequent improvements in levels of service to both internal and external parties.

Whilst this in itself is of great benefit to any association, even greater benefits can be achieved when the DM solution deployed also allows for data level integration with finance systems.

This is especially so when an integrated DM solution is augmented by the introduction of automated workflow processing based on the data extracted from documents.

Housing Associations should be engaging with suppliers of DM solutions that do more than simply allow invoices to be captured and filed.

It is strongly recommended that HAs work with suppliers that provide the facility for the data content of these documents to be automatically extracted and for this content to be linked directly to back-end systems. Such initiatives and levels of integration provide for:

- Faster and more effective processing of documents
- Workflow processes that allow for targeted and rapid online authorisation
- Increased use of electronic data capture to increase the speed and accuracy of transactional processing

The key concept from this area is the automatic capture and integration of data content. When assessing supplier capability, it is critical to ensure that the supplier has a track record in the successful implementation of such initiatives with a wide variety of applications.

Initiatives in Other Areas - Property and Tenancy Management

Initiatives in the Finance arena are only part of the DM story. Housing Associations also face a major battle with the vast amount of documentation that accumulates in other areas. For example, the Tenancy and Property areas of an association generate and accumulate large amounts of paper. Such files are created and maintained throughout HAs from different departments and disparate systems. Here are a few examples:

- Planned Maintenance Files
- Property Files
- Tenancy Files
- Contractor Files
- Rent Records
- Housing Benefit records
- Service Agreements
- Surveys
- Health and Safety Records

There can be thousands of such files in hundreds of filing cabinets spread across the association's premises. Cross referencing such files successfully is a major achievement in most organisations.

The problem is compounded by the requirement to maintain historical records for compliance purposes. For example, retention is needed to cover the all too frequent cases of disputes arising with tenants where document and content discovery will be required as proof for potential legal processes. There is also the additional requirement to be able to identify documents that are due for disposal, and the need for this process to be aligned with the organisations document retention schedules.

Even at the most fundamental level document management enables such files and information to be effectively cross-referenced and accessed rapidly when required.

Document Output & Storage

One further topic merits serious consideration and this is concerned with document creation, output and storage. For example, when a Contract of Works is produced for a contractor it should be possible to have this documentation automatically stored within the Document Management system, distributed to the contractor/s whilst being automatically indexed to maintain visibility and instant access for different areas within the association. The ability to workflow the works order/contract for internal approval prior to distribution, with a full record of approval/views made is also a vital ingredient added to the mix of any modern Document Management system.

Another example would be in the creation of rent statements. Statements should be automatically created when the back end system issues instruction, with statements then being distributed to tenants in their format of choice, both from a delivery perspective, (post, email etc), as well as in their required format, (large print, bold etc). Statements should then be available for front line staff to view and re-print/re-send instantly, increasing first response results for the association.

When works orders are created a record should be indexed and saved and, (if required), a workflow-based approval process automatically initiated. This again enables greater efficiencies and savings.

Conclusions

In a very real sense, an effective Document Management system should function as the glue which binds together the many seemingly disparate functions within a Housing Association. Such systems enable the HA to provide a much more efficient level of service in relation to both external stakeholders, (tenants, contractors etc), as well as internal stakeholders (customer teams, repairs teams etc). It is a process of enablement arising from well-planned technical initiatives. Managing properties, tenants, and contractors is greatly enhanced by the effective implementation of well integrated Document Management. Well integrated that is, both technically and as part of your operational processes.

Initial implementations may focus on the ability to enable savings and efficiencies in relation to basic document storage and access issues. However, it is of paramount importance that these systems also allow for data integration and automated workflow. It is important to deal with short term requirements of course, but future proofing your investment and leveraging it as part of the HA's evolution can truly make a success of the DM initiative.

If longer-term efficiencies are to be achieved then DM solutions in Social Housing have to be able to bind together the functions and services that Housing Associations provide to all their stakeholders.

Whilst closely coupled integration can create many new efficiencies, it should also be remembered that DM solutions must have the ability to integrate with a wide variety of often disparate legacy systems and be able to rapidly absorb the vast bulks of legacy documents which exist. It may also be argued that there are advantages in being able continue to use the legacy system front ends. They will allow operational continuity whilst also acting as a bridgehead, initiating indexing, search and retrieval functions from their familiar user interfaces. This enables more rapid implementations and can minimise the degree of change management needed. This sort of integration allows Housing Associations that implement DM solutions to grow into them at their own pace whilst achieving a greater level of commitment from users who wish to continue using legacy system application interfaces.