Housing Survey 2015

Online Customer Self Service

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Background

Interest in housing 'going digital' has grown over the last few years. One of the first and best trackers of progress has been Visceral's Connected Housing studies of 2013 and 2014, which captures the path of the top housing organisations.

Following their latest publication and new approaches to reviewing services online, there is a gap in knowledge and performance around self service.

Many housing providers are looking closely at serving customers better online. The development and take-up of online services should be high up on every housing organisations agenda. Notwithstanding this the need to keep up with more people online, greater expectations of services and strives to improve satisfaction.

Scouring the sector for good examples throws up front runners like Halton Housing and Thames Valley Housing. These are exemplar housing providers with a clear vision and approach to serve their customers well through digital channels.

In order to learn more about what others are doing we thought it will be good to look, ask and find out. Our starting point was to ask: Who else are doing great stuff online? Why bother to invest in online customer accounts, if you don't promote it? As a sector it would be fantastic if we could identify the volumes of active online customers of housing services, and to see whether this is taking off.

The idea was sparked further by interest in Yorkshire Housing's development of new online self services. North Wales Housing were developing their new website and tendering. Tony also has a real curiosity to provide clients with good advice and to up their game in self service.

The need to learn and share information about website self service across the housing sector is much needed. This report is a first step towards this and opens the door for more insight on what is taking place.

We hope you find the results illuminating and helpful in your future planning. Finally, we would like to thank all those people who have participated in the survey.

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Objectives

This research was therefore looking to address some of the following objectives:

- Understand UK Housing online self-service context;
- Baseline housing organisations levels of performance;
- See and clarify levels of expectation of what is or not possible;
- Learn how organisations promote take-up;
- See if any other factors encourage take-up;
- And identify the future potential for online customer accounts.

These guided the approach taken and questions to be asked of participants.

Method

An online Survey Monkey questionnaire was developed to capture feedback from a range of organisations. This was promoted via Twitter, LinkedIn and email.

The survey was launched on 3 March and closed on 10 April 2015. A total of 119 responses were received against a target of 100. A copy of the survey is included.

Responses

Responses were received from different sized organisations. Over half (56 per cent) came from <10,000 homes.

Answer Choices	Responses	
More than 40,000 Homes	2.73%	3
20,001 - 40,000 Homes	17.27%	19
15,001 - 20,000 Homes	7.27%	8
10,001 - 15,000 Homes	17.27%	19
5,001 - 10,000 Homes	30.91%	34
Less than 5,000 Homes	24.55%	27
Total		110

Only 47 responses provided a name to feedback or provide more information.

Executive Summary

Before distilling some of the key headlines from this study, it is worth pointing out that this is only a snapshot based on the 119 organisations that have responded to the Self Service in housing survey.

But, we have had a good sample of responses, thanks to all of you who have helped with this. It appears this is only the beginning of our journey – here we will run through some of the authors key findings:

Housing is shy to shout about services online – there is still some reluctance to accept that tenants use the internet like 'we' do. And some reluctance to promote heavily services to customers.

Customer accessibility tops concerns for growth - Lack of internet or WiFi access for tenants is still a perceived or actual barrier to confidence, in which self service can reach a big section of our customers.

Online digital services still in their infancy – some feeling IT and IT suppliers are holding us back.

Housing online pioneers are few and far between – many still with plans in development and those with online services are not getting significant online or self service volume per month. The gap between the pioneers and the rest is likely to continue to grow further.

Traditional rent and repair transactions dominate online services offered – these are a good starting point but are these being pushed to their full potential? A few are looking outside those areas more associated with estate management, like for example ASB incident reporting.

Responsive design favoured over downloadable apps – of those thinking about improving their offer, a responsive web service design for mobile is becoming central to their future development.

Online chat is the hot new feature – for customer services over the web, having the ability to talk in real time to users integrated with a customer contact centre is high on the ‘I want’ list.

Response bias from users of Orchard Systems – obviously as a key market player in housing systems, their responses dominate as this solution only available to Orchard customers.

So the challenge and opportunity is that there is still a lot of work to do. It’s all to play for. But we must step up the pace, speed and agility to match with customers’ expectations. And we have the potential to be much more collaborative in our design, thinking and solution sharing.

If we don’t – it will be our customers who we will fail the most.

Summary key findings

This section sets out a responses summary to key headlines. All detailed response data is available to download.

How long have online customer accounts been set up? (Q5)

Just under a quarter 22.5 per cent has been up and running for one to two years. It rises overall to 40 per cent for zero to two years. This is similar to those running from two to five years (43 per cent). Only 17 per cent has been running for five or more years.

1) 1 – 2 years 22.5%
2) Less than a year 18%
3) 5+ years 17%
4) 2 – 3 years 16%
5) 4 – 5 years 15%
6) 3 – 4 years 12%

What's the total number of online accounts registered? (Q6)

Only 4.2 per cent have more than 10,000 registered online accounts. Around 60 per cent have less than a 1,000 and two-thirds of these are under 500. Out of this, just 8.5 per cent had fewer than 25 customer accounts.

1) 501 – 1,000 21%
2) 2,001 – 4,000 15.5%
3) 101 – 250 17%
4) 251 – 500 14%

What's the number of active users in the last six months? (Q7)

Less than 250 active users are the largest group with 31 per cent, then group 251 to 500 with 23 per cent and third is group 501 to 1,000 with 19 per cent. Only 8 per cent have more than 4,000 active users.

1) Less than 250 31%
2) 251 – 500 23%
3) 501 – 1,000 19%

What per cent of existing customers are online? (Q13)

The biggest response came from 'Don't know' with 31 per cent. Only 25 per cent claim to have 51-75 per cent of customers online. And 7 per cent have 75+ per cent of customers online. Which leaves 37 per cent ranged from 0-50 per cent.

Answer Choices	Responses	
0 - 25	17.54%	10
26 - 50	19.30%	11
51 - 75	24.56%	14
75 +	7.02%	4
Don't know	31.58%	18
Total		57

What's the number of average weekly website visitors? (Q8)

By a significant margin almost three quarters (73 per cent) are the largest group to have less than 5,000 weekly website visitors. One quarter (25 per cent) said they had 5,000-10,000 weekly visitors.

1) Less than 5,000 73%
2) 5,001 to 10,000 25%
3) 10,001 to 20,000 2%

What services are offered online? (Q2)

A total of 15 popular services were available to select from the top five offered online are: Report repairs (86%); pay rent (83%); view rent account (83%); report ASB (58%); and find/search home (55%).

Out of the list 'Chat with customer services' (18%) came tenth on the list.

Top five online services

1) Report repairs 86.1%
2) Pay rent 83.3%
3) View rent account 76%
4) Report ASB 58.3%
5) Find/Search home 55.6%

What do you think are the barriers to increasing take up of online services? (Q12)

Out of 44 responses there was a variety of barriers suggested. The most common was lack/ease of access to computers/broadband. For example one said: "Limited functionality, linked with limited access to internet amongst certain groups of customers." And another said: "Lack of access to a computer or device that will enable tenants to use their accounts effectively."

Other reasons include not enough promotion, customer awareness and holding back because of confidence in the system and of potential users. For example one said: "Lack of promotion, we cannot expect customers to go digital if front line staff aren't too!" And another said: "Currently it's partly due to poor customer experience and functionality on our part.” And “We answer the phone too quickly! Some customers are not comfortable using the internet to transact.”

What are the plans for developing online customer self service? (Q10)

Out of 44 responses for many they had recently launched their portals, were developing them and bedding the systems in. For example: “New online services will be available on the new website including access to rent accounts.” And “Will be looking at development as part of overall communications projects looking at channel shift, very early stages at the moment.” Or like: “We have some services available on line but do not have a residential portal. This is planned for introduction in 2016.”

In other cases further work is being carried out, for example: “We're developing self-serve based on customer journey mapping rather than the 'out of the box' solution. In some instances this will mean developing software that sits on top of Orchard in order to improve the customer experience.” And “We are in the process of developing a housing portal which will go live within the next few months. At the moment, tenants can report a repair/ASB/compliment or complaint via email. There is a link to pay rent.”

How do you promote your customer accounts online? (Q14)

The website is the obvious place to promote self service and this came out top of the list with 87 per cent. It was then followed by customer magazine with 76 per cent, face to face by frontline staff 67 per cent and to sign up with start tenancies 65 per cent. After this was using Facebook and internal staff channels each with 57 per cent.

At the bottom, the least likely methods to use are paid for advertising (4 per cent) and auto enrolment (7 per cent).

1) Website home page 87%
2) Customer magazine 76%
3) Face to face frontline 67%
4) Starter tenancies 65%
5) Facebook 57%
6) Internal channels 57%

What other functionality is offered by online customer accounts? (Q4)

Responsive design with 54 per cent was cited most for other functionality offered online. Next came automate with internal systems with 49 per cent, then single sign on and integrate with workflow 40 per cent.

The least chosen options were ‘downloadable apps’ and ‘integrated with social media’ each with 21.5 per cent.

1) Responsive design 53.8%
2) Automate internal systems 49.2%
3) Single sign-on 40%
   = Integrate workflow 40%

What extra features would you like in the self service system you have in use? (Q9)

From 40 open text responses the most cited extra features you would like are to develop online or real time chat. For example: “Online chat and ability to leave messages/notes for customer services to access.”

Other features were around interface, automation and integration with housing systems. Some other examples: “Modern interface/design, good quality back office workflows, automated email notifications.”

“Report a repair, book a repair slot, live chat, real time account info, report asb, full housing management system integration, update your details, pay your rent...lots of this functionality is available (certainly not all) now but not within the self-service portal.”

“Simplified log in (and stay logged in when browsing rest of website) full integration with back office systems Customised notifications for users.”

What's the name of the software or platform which runs your online customer accounts? (Q11)

Orchard Systems dominated the list of responses which run online self services. There were also lots of other types in use including a small number developing bespoke solutions. Some examples:

"We built it ourselves. Uses a mixture of Microsoft based technologies."

"We've built it bespoke. We call it MyTVH."

"Bespoke process developed within the CMS auctioned by the uploading of a CVS file twice daily. Will be a mix of Aaeron/First Touch in the future."

Here are some others: Verseone CMS - the portal is a product called datafish; Our website is built in the Umbraco CMS, which pulls data via XML files from Open Housing; Moving to QL; and mostly done through SeeMyData.

List of the 47 housing organisations who have provided their contact details.

Nottingham City Homes
Sutton Housing Partnership
Merlin Housing Society
NPT Homes
SLH
Yorkshire Housing
Ongo
livin
South Liverpool Homes
Derby Homes
Bron Afon
Muir Group Housing Association
Bro Myrddin Housing Association
EMH Group
THH
Wulvern housing
Tai Calon Community Housing
Orbit
Clwyd Alyn Housing Association
Symphony Housing Group
Wigan and Leigh housing
Wrexham County Borough Council
Flagship
Welwyn Hatfield Community Housing Trust
Peaks and Plains Housing
whg
North star housing group
Coast & Country
North Wales Housing
Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd
Progress Housing Group
RHP
Six town housing
Mhs homes
Housing solutions
Knightstone Housing
Adactus Housing Group
Cadwyn Housing Association
Warwick District Council
SVHS
Wolverhampton Homes
Family Housing
Halton Housing Trust
Two Castles Housing
Futures Housing Group
Aspire Group
Greensquare