

Sovereign Business Integration case study – Tower Hamlets Community Housing

Outsourcing Supports Business Improvement

Tower Hamlets Community Housing's (THCH) first foray into outsourcing has proved a success, with Sovereign Business Integration delivering a more robust, reliable and well managed IT infrastructure. Having been upgraded from a one-star to a two-star Registered Social Landlord last year, following an inspection from the Audit Commission, THCH is keen to build upon this improvement and has embarked upon a three year outsourcing contract with Sovereign.

Outsourcing Commitment

THCH was established in 2000 with £21 million of Government funding and operates exclusively in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. After substantial growth and acquisition, it provides over 2,800 high-quality homes for rent, lease and shared ownership. The organisation employs 81 staff in three area branches as well as the new head office. Its significant development programme is expected to generate around 100 more houses per annum.

Underpinning efficient, effective service delivery to THCH residents is a robust IT infrastructure. However, in common with many organisations of its size, THCH has struggled to maintain and afford the breadth of skills required to manage a complex IT and telecommunications environment.

Indeed, by 2006 the organisation had not upgraded its IT hardware or software infrastructure, leading to significant performance issues. Furthermore, key software applications were about to go out of support and required urgent upgrades to ensure continuity of service.

Lacking the requisite resources in house, THCH turned to Sovereign Business Integration to deliver a managed service and create a structured plan to initially overhaul the IT infrastructure and then create a robust platform to support future service improvement.

Harneck Chilemba, finance director, THCH, explains, "The customer is at the heart of this organisation and IT has a key role to play in ensuring THCH can consistently deliver services to customers and that staff can solve customer issues. By creating a process of continual IT improvement, the organisation can become far more effective."

Upgraded IT Infrastructure

Sovereign's first move was to manage upgrades to the core systems used by THCH, including housing, property management, finance and reporting. "Sovereign has undertaken a major overhaul of the entire IT infrastructure," says Chilemba. "Critically, this has been achieved with minimal business disruption. Not only has work been undertaken out of hours but Sovereign has ensured the users have been kept informed throughout the project and understand the benefits these changes will deliver."

Alongside the technical migration, which included a shift to the latest OpenEdge10 database and the replacement of the ageing hardware with a new server, Sovereign has also spent time working with users to define their reporting requirements.

“In recent years, THCH users have developed hundreds of reports using BusinessObjects. However, many of these reports are outdated or failing to deliver the information now required by the business,” Chilemba confirms. “Sovereign spent a good deal of time working with the users to define their reporting requirements, clarify which reports to move across to the latest version of BusinessObjects and define new reports to meet the organisation’s information needs.”

Critically, Sovereign also took over the helpdesk, managing all incoming customer calls and immediately handling the backlog of customer queries. As a result calls halved within a matter of months, as customer problems were resolved faster and the new infrastructure delivered a more robust working environment.

Building for the Future

Having proved the success of outsourcing, in 2008 THCH decided to embark upon a three year managed services contract. Following a tender process in line with European Union guidelines, the contract was awarded to Sovereign.

“Sovereign has proven to have a range of excellent skills and the ability to keep complex projects on track with minimal business disruption. The company has a strong commitment to working with THCH to deliver an IT infrastructure that will enhance the quality and efficiency of customer service,” says Chilemba.

Having already created a robust IT architecture, Sovereign’s objective during the next three years is to deliver quantifiable ongoing improvements. The current project master plan is supported by continual updates and tracking to ensure IT development remains focused and enables THCH to meet the needs of its tenants.

The master plan ranges from complex organisational projects, including the adoption of Enterprise Content Management (ECM), to one-off projects such as the need to meet National Register of Social Housing requirement for ethnicity reporting.

“The Equal Opportunities Commission has set tight deadlines for social housing organisations to comply with ethnicity reporting demands,” he says. “Sovereign has put in place a solution that pulls together diverse information sources to automate this reporting requirement for THCH ahead of deadline.”

Ambitious Plans

Indeed, over the next two years, THCH has ambitious plans to improve the quality of service delivered to tenants and enhance operational efficiency. This will be underpinned by the introduction of ECM and VoIP to improve the overall quality of IT usage and deliver bottom line benefits.

Chilemba says, “Sovereign has already run a workshop for THCH to enable the organisation to understand the potential benefits electronic records could deliver.” Key objectives include better use of the new head office space by reducing paper-based filing and ensuring individuals at THCH, whether in head office or local offices, have access to a central database of information to improve the quality and timeliness of customer service.

“Ensuring all structured and unstructured information is located in one system will make THCH far more productive and responsive to customer needs,” Chilemba says.

The organisation will not, however, be embarking upon a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) programme, despite earlier plans. “Sovereign undertook a

robust project-scoping exercise for CRM,” he says. “It became very clear that CRM is simply not necessary for THCH – the required improvements in customer service at each local office can be achieved through the implementation of ECM.”

He continues, “Sovereign’s pragmatic approach to technology adoption has saved THCH many thousands of pounds in unnecessary IT expenditure.”

Controlled Environment

In addition to creating a robust architecture, Sovereign has also redeveloped all IT policies and procedures. This includes the creation of a high-level business continuity plan that provides a step-by-step guide to bringing systems back online in the event of an outage. Critically, this process can be simply managed by any one of a number of staff to minimise operational risk.

The company is also continually working with THCH users to ensure the quality and relevance of the IT infrastructure. And the transformation is clear: following a recent inspection by the Audit Commission, THCH has been promoted from a one-star to two-star Registered Social Landlord.

Chilemba concludes, “Initially, Sovereign was focused heavily on fire-fighting, upgrading the infrastructure to bring THCH’s IT up to date, which has delivered quantifiable improvements in performance and efficiency. Now, with this three year contract, Sovereign can be more proactive, working in partnership with THCH to enable continual improvements to the quality of customer service.”

About Sovereign Business Integration

Headquartered in London and operating internationally, Sovereign Business Integration is a Business Solutions and IT Services company that helps its clients to implement effective 'IT Solutions' to solve a variety of business problems.

Sovereign provides a broad range of services tailored to clients' needs, including business & IT consultancy, through IT systems & software development to Managed Services, Hosting & Outsourcing, across a range of open and proprietary platforms.

Sovereign’s skilled IT consultants and service specialists have a strong track record of designing, deploying and managing practical IT solutions in a variety of market sectors, including social housing, professional practices, logistics & supply chain, financial services, insurance and the public sector.

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