

ENGLISH CHURCHES HOUSING GROUP



English
Churches
Housing

“HELPING HOMELESS PEOPLE IS A PRIORITY, BUT IT ALSO OFFERS A WIDE RANGE OF CHALLENGES. FOR A HOUSING ORGANIZATION, SUCCESS REQUIRES THE SAME LEVEL OF CRITICAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT AS ANY MULTI-NATIONAL COMPANY.”

—ANDY MCQUAID, HEAD OF PERFORMANCE REVIEW AT ENGLISH CHURCHES HOUSING GROUP

BACKGROUND

Homelessness is the most acute form of housing need. It can affect all households: families with children, elderly people, and single people. People lose their homes for a variety of reasons: relationship breakdowns, domestic violence, and eviction by landlords or inability to keep up with mortgage payments following loss of employment. In 2000/01 a total of 114,350 households were accepted as homeless by local authorities. This figure does not include all homeless people, as local authorities are not obliged to assist everyone who becomes homeless.

There is a shortage of good quality, affordable homes in this country. It is estimated that 100,000 affordable homes will be needed each year between 2000 and 2011. Despite the solution to the problem being discussed at length in Parliament, but never resolved, some organizations are making a significant difference. The English Churches Housing Group (ECHG) is one such organization.

ECHG provides a range of housing for single homeless people, families on low incomes, and older people in need of sheltered housing. Its supported housing schemes also provide specialist help for people with mental health, drink, drugs, or other problems.

As one of the largest housing associations in England, it manages over 12,000 properties and more than 26,000 tenants around the UK. These include houses, flats, and single rooms. Due to the unpredictable situation some of the tenants find themselves in—no access to housing benefit to pay the rent, searching for employment, needing to move, and so on, ECHG has to make sure the use of its housing stock is maximized. This means ensuring that homes are re-allocated at short notice and as quickly as possible, in the event of a person or family becoming unexpectedly homeless. For this process to work, and for the optimum number of people to be housed, effective communication across all nationwide offices is essential.

And this is where the problem lies...

THE CHALLENGE

The main issues faced by ECHG were maximizing rental income and matching the houses available (voids) with those people that needed accommodation. Inconsistency in how this was managed was a major problem for an organization split into seven business units across the whole of England, with each one managing a geographical area. Each of these had independent analysis and reporting methods, making it almost impossible for a direct comparison of performance between business units or to get a consistent corporate overview.

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The person whose task it was to reorganize the entire reporting and analysis process was Andy McQuaid, Head of Performance Review at ECHG. “The lack of consistent, reliable, and up-to-date information on our housing stock and letting process had the risk of undermining the effectiveness of managing our funds and housing stock,” said Mr. McQuaid.

“We have a large database of housing information and records, but couldn’t easily access the information to create concise and accurate reports. Although it had the capacity to store 9Gb of data, it was designed primarily for data input rather than data extraction and was therefore extremely difficult to use. We needed a central database, from which custom, up-to-date reports could be developed by any department at any time.”

In a drive for improvements in service delivery and rent collection, ECHG pioneered a centralized approach to rent collection and arrears recovery at its customer service center in Leicester, which also houses its 24-hour call center service to more than 60,000 tenants. However, the existing legacy system didn’t readily lend itself to this centralized, telephone-based approach. It was also difficult to extract tailored reports from the main database that could then be used to highlight problem areas and to target debt recovery actions.

“The rent and arrears reports available from the existing systems were large and often hid the key areas for action among superfluous information, or were in a unfriendly format. There was no flexibility to remove or filter out unwanted data from these reports or to present them in a way that matched the responsibilities of each arrears agent. This made their job much more difficult and tended to undermine staff effectiveness,” said Mr. McQuaid. “We had to improve the efficiency of the arrears management process if we were to make a real impact on the overall performance of the department and gain a better understanding of the organization’s arrears profile.”

THE SOLUTION

The organization therefore started looking at various software solutions that could impact the organizational performance, as well as having the flexibility to meet the changing demand for performance information, both within and outside ECHG. After looking at the various offerings, Mr. McQuaid chose Cognos PowerPlay. The main buying decision behind it was its Web capability, providing a speed of reporting and analysis that the other companies couldn’t meet.

Cognos PowerPlay delivers a complete Business Performance Measurement (BPM) reporting and analysis environment for enterprise applications. This allows ECHG managers to slice, dice, and drill down through the information available, cutting and segmenting it to reflect their individual requirements.

“Our users thought it was fantastic, particularly with the charts and visual impacts. The benefit of being able to drill down into information and zoom in on specific data that had previously been unattainable was unimaginable,” said Mr. McQuaid.

THE BENEFITS

There has been an immediate improvement in the communication and co-ordination between the business units and departments within the organization. Cognos PowerPlay has helped ECHG develop a higher degree of performance awareness among managers and staff, who are now much more confident in the reports that are produced.

By enabling a complete analysis of voids information on a weekly basis, across all regions, the process of re-letting the properties can be streamlined and turnaround times shortened—which has to be beneficial to people looking for homes.

Now the management team, executive, and board of directors have ready access to accurate and reliable reports upon which to base strategic and operational business decisions, such as which properties to redevelop to meet the needs of potential tenants. “From a managerial point of view, the executive and board now have the required information at their fingertips, which just wasn’t available before,” said Mr. McQuaid.

Because of the dispersed nature of its housing stock, ECHG has many staff remotely located or based at home. The Cognos solution provides easy access to these staff via the Web portal to a suite of tailored reports that are automatically updated each week, providing the latest position for immediate action.

FUTURE

Mr. McQuaid and his team are intent on expanding the use of the Cognos solution, after seeing the benefits the initial implementation has created. Monitoring rental agreements is the next area that will benefit from Cognos’ technology. They also plan to link in to other stand-alone databases so that statistical information, otherwise held separately within the organization, can be brought together into single reports for better analysis.

Once completed, this will enable ECHG to monitor all arrears, track and ensure all payments are balanced, and monitor occupancy levels in each region. “When we have implemented Cognos across all segments of our operations, we’ll have a complete Web-based reporting solution. Judging by the solution’s initial success, this will result in even better management of our properties and will enable us to further reduce the number of homeless in the UK,” Mr. McQuaid concluded.

WHY COGNOS?

Only Cognos delivers a complete range of integrated, scalable software for corporate performance management. Cognos products let organizations drive performance with enterprise planning and budgeting, monitor it with scorecarding, and understand it with business intelligence reporting and analysis. Founded in 1969, Cognos now serves more than 22,000 customers in over 135 countries.



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