



Southern Housing Group

Viewpoint

“Southern Housing Group is one of the largest providers of affordable housing in the south of England. We’re responsible for the management of the Group’s entire IT infrastructure, ensuring users have appropriate and reliable access to the applications and information they need to deliver an efficient and high quality service to tenants”

Jan Swanwick
Group IT Manager



Rebuilding for future growth

With over 100 years experience, Southern Housing Group is one of the largest providers of affordable housing in the south of England. Working in partnership with over 50 local authorities, the Group has a reputation for reliable local housing management. Based in London and the south of England, it provides housing solutions and support for those most in need. In recent years Southern Housing Group has grown at a significant rate through a series of acquisitions and mergers with other housing associations, a strategy that it continues to build upon. With over 500 employees, it has needed to develop its infrastructure substantially to meet new needs.

The proactive adoption of Thin Computing has been key to facilitating Southern Housing Group’s expansion. The implementation of Wyse thin clients has transformed the Group’s IT infrastructure, effectively meeting new and existing users’ needs whilst controlling costs. It has enabled the IT team to provide a feature-rich working environment to users and improve their ability to serve the needs of the Group’s tenants. It has also greatly simplified the process of integrating newly acquired housing associations into the Group, in a fraction of the time it would have taken to integrate traditional PC-based networks.

Taking Action

As Group IT Manager, Jan Swanwick is responsible for the management of the Group’s entire IT infrastructure. “We have a team of over 20 support staff that ensures users have appropriate and reliable access to the applications and information they need to deliver an efficient and high quality service to tenants”, says Swanwick. The Group has two main offices (corporate headquarters and an operational office with a 40-seat service centre), seven regional offices each with 10-70 staff and 110 estate offices with between one and five staff.

“We were struggling because we just didn’t have an infrastructure to support the demands of the organisation”

When Swanwick joined the Group in 2004, the IT infrastructure consisted of Compaq servers and NT workstations at each location. “We had 400 fat clients sitting on desktops across a wide geography and used a wide area network. Different management techniques had been applied, none of which had proved successful, and we didn’t have the skills in-house to remedy problems effectively.” The rapid expansion of the Group and reliance on user-specific PCs made supporting users increasingly difficult and time-consuming. Swanwick comments: “I’d never previously been responsible for an IT department where we had a van in constant use visiting users to repair and replace PCs. It often took days if not weeks to close a support call.”

Continued...

Swanwick embarked on a project to implement a technology refresh that would bring Southern Housing Group up-to-date and allow the organisation to adapt to new situations quickly and easily. "We were using a plethora of business applications and were struggling because we just didn't have an infrastructure to support the demands of the organisation", he says. With Southern Housing Group growing rapidly through acquisitions and mergers, there was a real need to support and manage applications as new staff came on board.

From previous experience, Swanwick recognised the value that thin clients would bring to the Group and enable it to significantly reduce costs and increase staff productivity. "We were in a position where we were using PCs and Citrix, which simply doubled our support requirements. We realised that if we were using Citrix we should run a proper Thin Computing infrastructure by deploying thin client devices to the users' desktops. In ITIL terms, this immediately lifted us from the lowest stage of IT maturity (which is technology focus) and enabled us to concentrate on customer service which is the basis of the next two higher levels."

In November 2004 Swanwick completed a month-long trial of Wyse 1200LE thin clients. "I knew that the Wyse thin clients were not only more reliable and cost effective, but that they stood head and shoulders above any other devices" he says. Having proved the technology and gained approval, Swanwick chose to rollout Wyse thin clients across the Group. He explains: "We based this decision on factors such as their ease of set up, management and low cost. Testing the set up time, we found that it takes under a minute to remove a 1200LE from its box, plug it in, set up and log in. Thin Clients are so simple."

"Our support calls have fallen by over 75%. That really is down to moving away from a plethora of disparate PCs and using thin clients everywhere"

Between November 2004 and April 2005, Swanwick rolled out the Wyse 1200LE devices across the Group. "By the end of April 2005 we had 500 Wyse thin clients married to a Citrix server farm at our operational centre in Horsham. We used HP Blade servers to enforce change control of all applications." The Group's key business applications include a Housing Management Software application that will only work over a Wide Area Network using Citrix, standard MS Office applications and other specialist applications to monitor customer satisfaction and manage property inventory.

Achieving Objectives

"The new infrastructure has created significant operational and financial benefit and has been greeted positively by all employees", says Swanwick. "They welcomed the technology refresh. The main driver for adopting the technology had been the need to simplify our infrastructure, with low maintenance, low total cost of ownership and easy management being key measurements."

The Group also realised other significant benefits. It had been growing through a programme of acquisitions and mergers with other housing associations. When the Group acquired South Wight Housing Association, the IT team simply linked its PCs to the wide area network and put staff on the same mail system. "This integration took a lot of time and trouble to get right" says Swanwick. "By comparison, when we merged Isle of Wight Housing Association, and later the James Butcher Housing Association into the Group using Wyse thin clients, we completed the process in just a weekend. We simply moved their files and mail boxes to the standard Southern Housing Group desktop system and gave them a thin client and screen. When they logged in on the Monday morning, they had everything they needed. The devices are so versatile.

Since implementing Wyse thin clients the day-to-day need for first line technical support has diminished so much that the Group has been able to reduce the size of the technical support team. "Our support calls have fallen by over 75%", says Swanwick. "That really is down to moving away from a plethora of disparate PCs and using thin clients everywhere."

Swanwick adds how thin clients have changed the type of support calls the team receives: "Before thin clients it was more a case of complexity than the number of calls, with most problems taking hours or even days to rectify. Now we not only receive fewer calls, but they are resolved within minutes. Problems occur rarely now. We don't get the applications freezing on the system and files don't get lost like they did when we had desktop PCs. The devices also afford important environmental benefits – they take up significantly less space, use less electricity, are quieter and their lack of moving parts makes them more reliable. This all makes a significant contribution to our sustainability strategy."

The deployment of the Wyse thin clients has also enabled Swanwick to make better use of his IT team. Simplifying user support allows the team to concentrate on delivering business solutions rather than fixing technology problems. "Moving to Thin Computing has enabled us to consolidate from over 400 applications to just 25 key ones which are managed centrally", he says. "Also, we're no longer seen as 'the fix-it team'. The thin clients have allowed us to become more streamlined and provide greater value to the organisation. Without doubt Thin Computing was the best way for us to progress. It has enabled us to focus on delivering business systems rather than repairing faulty technology, and that's a quantum leap forward."

Conclusion

"Moving to Thin Computing has enabled us to consolidate from over 400 applications to just 25 key ones which are managed centrally. Without doubt Thin Computing was the best way for us to progress. It has enabled us to focus on delivering business systems rather than repairing faulty technology, and that's a quantum leap forward"