

Q&A: The Housing Hive

Session: 8.10

Topic: Plymouth Community Homes' lettings transformation project with John Yates and Denise reeves

Q. Does the new process use the Northgate application form/module at all?

There will be a process to create the application, household members and associated data from the XML file from the choice based letting service (Devon Home Choice). Andy is writing code to call the corresponding Northgate API's from the Apex web application that he has created. The result will then pre-populate the Application Portal created by Prodo – all comms will be captured via the on-line portal and fed back to Northgate.

Q. Does the scheme cover an internal waitlist or just applicants from Devon HC.

At the moment Devon HC, but we have a handful of units in Cornwall so we will extend it to them too once this bit's up and running. We don't have an internal waiting list, but we do do some 'management moves', and there's no reason why they shouldn't go through the portal, although there are so few that it probably isn't worth doing them that way - also, of course, the properties we're moving them too wouldn't be advertised on Homechoice.

Q. What customer engagement do you do?

Not very much, I'm afraid. We debated involving customers in the design, but the Project Board's view was that it would be less useful that perhaps it looks at first sight. After all, we don't have much choice about the questions we ask or the documents we need people to upload for us. Equally, quite hard to engage our 'customers' as they're by definition not existing tenants and of course we don't know who they are till they apply to us! We're keen though to monitor and measure the uptake, and user experience, closely once it's up and running.

Q. Did you do one process at a time but using same products for other processes?

The approach uses proven technology used by our existing MyPCH portal and is built on Umbraco which is the CMS. The principle is to utilise the Prodo methods and designs to promote further “channel shift” and to reduce the admin overheads associated with our existing customer / tenant communication channels. Ideally, the plan would be to address each Use Case or set of related Use Cases at a time. Thereby allowing the proliferation of its use and for the portal to grow organically.

Q. Has the pandemic helped with cultural shift to digital and move to new ways of working?

Hugely!! We work almost entirely out of one building in Plymouth, which we closed down almost completely. Mad rush to get everyone equipped with laptops, tablets, TEAMS etc (inc. our DLO we have over 600 staff, and because we're geographically in one city area we didn't have people working remotely before the pandemic). We had done a lot of work on mobile working before the pandemic, though, and that stood us in good stead - people were used to the idea, managers were used to the concept of management by outcome rather than presence etc. We've been really chuffed with how it's all gone and certainly don't plan to go back to the old way of working.