Fordway

Gloucester City Homes

took back control of their IT and cut costs at the same time, all 3 months ahead of schedule. Here's how.

The Background

Gloucester City Homes (GCH) became an independent housing association in 2015, following a transfer of properties from Gloucester City Council. It is responsible for almost 5,000 rented, leasehold and shared ownership homes and 62 homeless units and is recognised as one of the best housing providers in the country, including being ranked 40th in the Sunday Times Top 100 non-profit making organisations.

The Need

When GCH became independent, it had no IT resources and needed an immediate solution. The only feasible option was to outsource in a traditional virtual hosting environment, with all services delivered from the provider's data centre. After four years GCH had become dissatisfied with this provision. It was constraining development and growth, impacting everything from efficiency and decision making to customer service, and was considered poor value for money. The accompanying monthly management report was also not meeting its needs, providing a mass of data without clearly showing the performance parameters GCH required.

At a Glance

Company: Gloucester City Homes

Industry: Non-profit

No. Sites: 22 sites across the UK

No. Employees: Approx 200

Objectives: Reliable, flexible and cost efficient IT Service
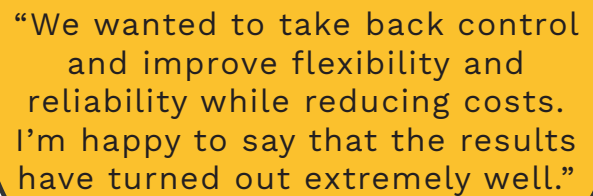
Solutions: IT as a Service (ITaaS)

Product: Hybrid platform, end user computing, business continuity

"Today is a major landmark in the delivery of our IT strategy and a real day of celebration for everyone at GCH. The GCH IT team are receiving a quite incredible amount of (virtual) love from the entire business today and it's only right – given your efforts, professionalism, pragmatism and good humour – that we share that love with you!"

Replacing an inflexible, poor value for money service

"We weren't happy with the level of service we'd been receiving, despite paying a huge amount of the money, and reliability and flexibility were poor," explained Paul Haines, Head of IT at GCH. "There was far too much downtime, plus issues with how the technology had been set up – and it was five years out of date. Problems kept recurring, which led to productivity issues for our staff.

Paul and his team moved services into public cloud where possible, using Microsoft Office 365 and Microsoft Azure. However, as Paul points out: "Our old legacy applications don't play well with others and in the cloud." So GCH issued a tender on the Technology Services (TS2) framework to host and manage other aspects of its IT estate. After evaluating the responses, GCH chose ITaaS provider Fordway to implement a managed cloud solution.

"We wanted to take back control and improve flexibility and reliability while reducing costs. I'm happy to say that the results have turned out extremely well."

"We were looking for a supplier closer to ourselves in size and who would focus on service and solutions," Paul explained. "Fordway seemed to tick all those boxes. Their proposal was relatively similar to others we received but there were two key differences. Their pricing was competitive – they clearly run an efficient ship – and they offered a better level of service, with the ability to speak directly to someone who knew what they were doing and could answer our questions."
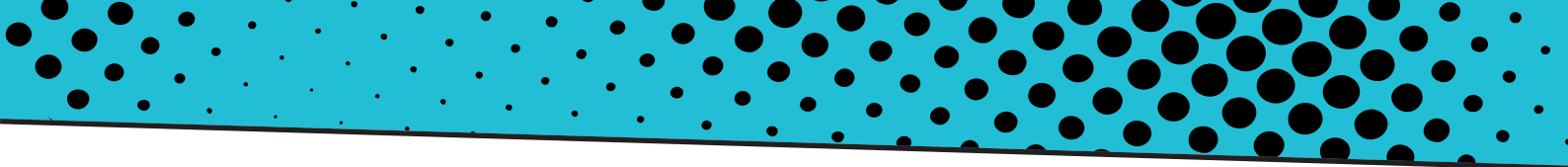
A strategic solution with a roadmap for the future

When Fordway was appointed, its team began by sitting down with GCH to discuss the organisation's strategic vision and held workshops to ensure both immediate and longer-term requirements were clearly understood by both parties. In the words of the GCH Board, the organisation's aim is "to deliver a transformative ICT programme over the next five years." This will include extending resident self-service through increasing use of digital technologies.

While GCH had moved some services to public cloud, it also relied on legacy applications, such as its bespoke housing management software. Fordway transferred these applications seamlessly from the incumbent provider's premises to its own Tier 3 UK
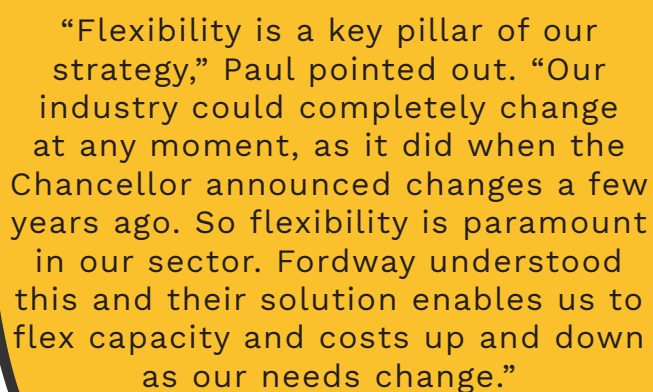
Approach

"Coming to visit our sites was incredibly useful in building the relationships and understanding between us," Paul explained. "We quickly established a level of trust and it was clear that everyone at Fordway knew what they were talking about, as well as being extremely professional and good humoured."

data centres, where they are fully managed and secured as private cloud services, with daily backups and a DR service in place. This has enabled GCH to take advantage of cloud's scalability, flexibility and efficiency. Fordway also handles patching, ensuring that there are no vulnerabilities anywhere in GCH's IT estate.

For end user computing Fordway has implemented desktop as a service (DaaS), streaming applications to users on native desktops. This provides GCH with remote working capability, enabling users to log in whenever and from wherever they wish, with consistent security controls across all devices. Patching and updates are handled centrally, and Fordway has incorporated multifactor authentication (MFA) for additional security.

"Flexibility is a key pillar of our strategy," Paul pointed out. "Our industry could completely change at any moment, as it did when the Chancellor announced changes a few years ago. So flexibility is paramount in our sector. Fordway understood this and their solution enables us to flex capacity and costs up and down as our needs change."

DaaS has been particularly helpful during the COVID-19 lockdown. Many GCH staff are considered key workers, and it has enabled them to continue working safely and provide essential services to their residents, from maintenance to advice on welfare benefits and the changing COVID-19 legislation. "We were able to work from home from day one of the lockdown with no issues," confirms Paul. "Without DaaS the last three months would have been extremely difficult."

IT as a Service with multi-supplier management

One of GCH's concerns with its previous IT supplier had been reporting. Fordway defined key parameters and now provides clear, focused service reports every month to give GCH a thorough understanding of how its IT service is performing. There is also a dedicated Fordway service delivery manager, who is the first point of contact should any issues arise.

GCH has run the transformation as an agile project, as it encompassed multiple other strands. This has included having multiple suppliers logged into the same servers at the same time! As part of its ITaaS provision Fordway ensures that all services dovetail seamlessly. The organisation has also won some of the additional projects, including providing second and third line support for equipment such as core network switches as well as for the cloud service, installing a new network monitoring tool and setting up an RF network to provide connectivity to GCH's satellite offices.

The view from GCH:
Professional, Efficient and Knowledgeable

The migration schedule was tight, as Fordway was appointed in May 2019 and the contract with the incumbent service provider expired in March 2020. Fordway aimed to complete the migration by the end of January 2020, but all services were successfully transferred by mid-December 2019 – three months ahead of the 'drop-dead' date when previous contract would end.

Paul Haines responded immediately to Fordway's CEO Richard Blanford: "Thank you for all of your hard work, professionalism, knowledge and good humour over the last few months. We have migrated our core services three months ahead of the drop-dead date with very little disruption to the business, and queries and requests have been dealt with quickly and efficiently. We're looking forward to continuing to build on our relationship and are feeling pretty pleased with ourselves for choosing you guys earlier this year."

At the end of March 2020, when the previous contract ended, GCH again thanked Fordway for the company's role in the transition.

GCH IT Operations Manager David Wainwright said: "Thank you for your effort and professionalism in completing this critical activity on GCH's transition programme."
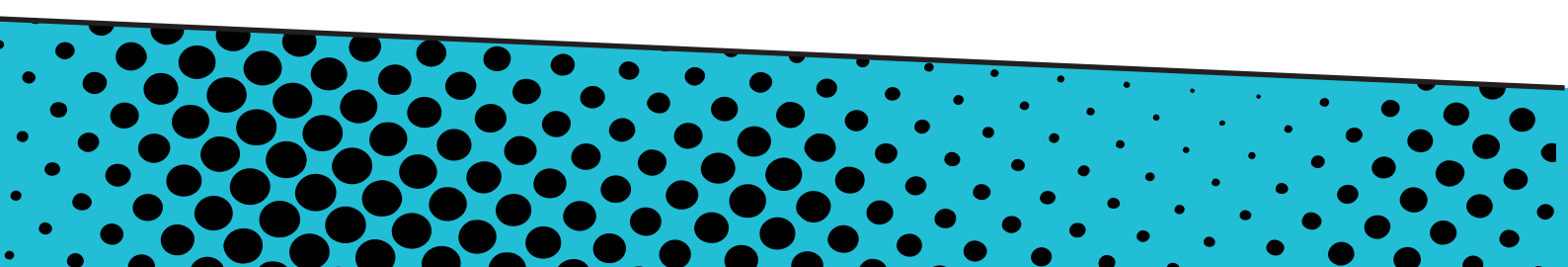
Paul added: "Can I also add my thanks to all of you. Today is a major landmark in the delivery of our IT strategy and a real day of celebration for everyone at GCH. The GCH IT team are receiving a quite incredible amount of (virtual) love from the entire business today and it's only right – given your efforts, professionalism, pragmatism and good humour – that we share that love with you!"

Enabling more money to be spent on social good

While reducing costs is important to all organisations, for GCH it also benefits the local community.

"We've been able to reduce our costs significantly, and as we're a not for profit organisation any money that is not spent on IT will be used for social good, such as building new housing and helping people who have become homeless," Paul concludes. "Our working environment has been sorted out, with all the niggly issues gone, and we now have a flexible IT service that we can rely on."

GCH is continuing to implement its new IT strategy and is talking to Fordway about how they can provide further assistance and support as GCH continues its digital transformation.

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