

Working in Partnership with Freebridge Community Housing to Provide Advanced IT Solutions

Freebridge Community Housing is a not-for-profit Housing Association set up in 2006 to take the transfer of the housing stock of the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk. Freebridge operates across the whole of West Norfolk, with its main office in King's Lynn. At the date of transfer, Freebridge owned and managed around 7,000 properties for rent to those in housing need.



Freebridge is a “gateway” Housing Association which means everything revolves around end delivery to the tenants. In fact, over half of the members of the board are tenants and their vision statement focuses on building properties and better lives for people in West Norfolk.

The Challenge

To set up a network infrastructure for the newly formed Freebridge Community Housing and transfer over the council emails, file services and housing system with as little disruption to tenants as possible.

Dave Clements, ICT Manager of Freebridge, was appointed in September 2005 with the brief of overseeing all IT issues associated with the stock transfer project, working in conjunction with the council IT team. At this time, Freebridge existed only in name but following the stock transfer would become a separate organisation from the council, with its own offices.

The main task was to establish what would be needed on day one (following the transfer of stock) – email, file services and the housing management system (which controls rents and lettings and logs repairs on properties). One hundred and thirty staff working for the council would be transferring to Freebridge, along with an estimated 200GB of data.

A decision was made to move ownership of the current housing management system to Freebridge rather than set up a new system, which meant all the hardware and software would need to be transferred. For emails, Freebridge decided to implement a separate system from the council and realised they would need assistance due to the scale of the project.

A new Network Administrator had been recruited to join the Freebridge IT team, so a key element of the project was the understanding that the selected supplier would work with the new employee and transfer skills, allowing Freebridge to manage the system after the project was completed.

EACS was selected in December 2005, Dave Clements, ICT Manager at Freebridge said “I felt EACS was keen and we would be able to develop a relationship with them. I was confident they would be able to work to the short timescales we had available before the final stock transfer”.

The Solution

Robust and Reliable Infrastructure

EACS worked as part of the Freebridge IT project team assisting with the planning, design and installation of the project to help migrate the housing section of the council's infrastructure over to Freebridge, making sure to provide a robust and reliable infrastructure solution.



TRAINING



SERVICE



SOLUTIONS



SUPPORT



SUPPLY



NETWORKING

EACS ensured the initial infrastructure was implemented approximately six weeks before the date of stock transfer in the council server room, to allow testing and development to be carried out. This gave Freebridge confidence in the new system, as they were able to see what it would look like and test its stability.

Comprehensive Knowledge Transfer

To aid the knowledge transfer process the new Network Administrator for Freebridge was kept informed throughout the project and visited the EACS head office in Cambridgeshire to meet and work with key members of the team. EACS ensured that the Administrator felt confident in managing the system once the project was complete.



Smooth Desktop Rollout & Migration

On the weekend of the stock transfer, EACS assisted with desktop rollouts and migration and worked in partnership with Freebridge's growing IT team (now 3 with the recruitment of a Systems Administrator) to transfer domains and set up new machines, ensuring that end users would be

able to carry on with their jobs with the minimum inconvenience on stock transfer day.

Detailed Planning, Installation & Deployment

"A lot of planning went into the handover with an hour by hour itinerary produced by EACS" said Dave Clements. "The handover started Friday lunchtime and finished on schedule at 4pm Sunday afternoon. EACS was also there on the first day of the changeover to ensure everything was running smoothly. The work was completed on schedule for the stock transfer date of 3 April 2006 and crucially, the end users didn't notice any difference and neither did the tenants".

Sound Advice

In Phase One, many of the council staff stayed in the council building with some at a small site nearby. However, as part of the stock transfer, Freebridge bought a new building across the road from the council. Phase Two of the project involved moving to these new premises, which meant a new server room needed to be constructed. EACS provided advice on what to consider and consultation on the design. By May 2006 the council servers were moved to the new building and staff and their new desktops were moved in only six weeks after stock transfer. Again, EACS managed the desktop migration and were present on move day to make sure everything ran smoothly.

Working in Partnership Now & in the Future

"EACS is our preferred IT partner and we want to build on the partnership," explained Dave Clements. "Their Account Managers are not too pushy and I am confident in the work they have done for us. We are able to pick up the phone and chat about ideas and they are always responsive to our needs".

Last summer, Freebridge looked at business continuity and disaster recovery and turned to EACS as their trusted IT partners again. "We have a Housing Repairs depot on the outskirts of town and decided to centre our DR solution servers there to minimise risk. We met on a regular basis with EACS and they recommended a solution which we could manage and test inhouse".

"From my experience with EACS I know that I can trust and work well with them as they've helped us to achieve a major project. The relationship has developed and they know what we're about – it's all about honesty and trust".

