



# **Social Landlords and Digital Inclusion in Scotland**

**Briefing from CIH Scotland**

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December 2011

The Chartered Institute of Housing is the professional body for people involved in housing and communities. We are a registered charity and not for profit organisation. We have a diverse and growing membership of over 22,000 people – both in the public and private sectors.

CIH Scotland has more than 2,500 members working in local authorities, housing associations, housing co-operatives, Scottish Government and Government agencies, voluntary organisations, the private sector and educational institutions. The CIH aims to ensure members are equipped to do their job by working to improve practice and delivery. We also represent the interests of our members in the development of strategic and national housing policy.

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## **Introduction**

This briefing, written as part of a Stirling University student internship with CIH Scotland, looks at the impact of digital exclusion on tenants and other users of social landlords' services, and at what social landlords are doing and could do to promote digital inclusion. It is written within the Scottish context, but draws on examples from across the UK.

It is not intended to be an in-depth study of the issue, but aims to help social landlords consider the benefits of proactively promoting digital inclusion, and, in the final, extensive section of the briefing, provides a range of practice examples of services which have sought to promote digital inclusion.

## 1. What is Digital Inclusion and Where do Social Landlords Fit in?

For the purposes of this report, digital inclusion can be defined as the incorporation of information technologies into a community in order to promote education and improve quality of life. Digital inclusion has two strands:

- Ensuring that all citizens have the opportunity to enjoy the direct benefits which digital technology has to offer, through both access to technology and the skills, motivation and confidence to use it to improve their lives
- Ensuring that the indirect benefits of technology improve all aspects of service planning and delivery

CIH Scotland believes that by taking action on both fronts, social landlords can play their part in ensuring that as many people as possible – not least those from more deprived communities – fully benefit from the use of digital technologies.

Putting the role of social landlords into the wider context, promotion of digital inclusion is a significant component of the Scottish Government's economic strategy. In March 2011 the Scottish Government published 'Scotland's Digital Future: 'A Strategy for Scotland'<sup>1</sup>. This recognises the economic benefits which will follow from Scotland having high speed broadband infrastructure, which will encourage businesses to be more competitive and drive international trade. The Scottish Government believes that by working with a number of partners in order to understand future priorities in relation to the digital economy, their strategy will ensure the roll out of next generation broadband across Scotland.

In November 2011, the Scottish Government, leading private sector firms, academic institutions and charities signed up to Scotland's Digital Participation Charter<sup>2</sup>. Signed by founding partners including Microsoft and BT Scotland, the Charter involves making a commitment to share information and align resources and efforts to deliver shared digital participation outcomes over the lifetime of the current Parliament.

The particular role which social landlords might play in promoting digital inclusion has come under sharp focus very recently. In early December 2011, the UK's "Digital Champion" Martha Lane Fox highlighted the stark fact that almost half of the UK's offline population lived in social housing<sup>3</sup>. She argued that if just 3.5% of those in social housing who were both offline and unemployed got online and found work the net economic benefit would be more than £200m. Her report urges social housing providers to join "Race Online 2012" and to sign up to the Social Housing Providers Digital Inclusion Strategy Group<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Scotland's Digital Future: A Strategy for Scotland  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/981/0114237.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/11/07133415>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2011/dec/05/martha-lane-fox-social-housing-tenants-online>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.housing-technology.com/downloads/HousingTechnology\\_DigitalbyDefault2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.housing-technology.com/downloads/HousingTechnology_DigitalbyDefault2012_FINAL.pdf)

## 2. The Links between Digital and Social Exclusion

Most discussion about digital exclusion focuses on use of the internet. Research suggests that there are strong links between social and digital exclusion, with indications that those who are socially excluded are three times more likely to be digitally excluded. The Oxford Internet Survey<sup>5</sup> found that only 43% of people in the lowest income category in Britain used the internet, compared with 99% of those in the highest income category.

The National Housing Federation's Digital Exclusion and Social Housing Report (2010)<sup>6</sup> argued that persistent digital exclusion produced serious issues which crossed over with social landlords' wider social welfare role. These issues could exacerbate persistent social immobility, and were based around:

- access to public and commercial services,
- access to information,
- ability to participate in community activities, discussions and decision making.

The Oxford Internet Survey highlighted that those most deprived socially are also most likely to lack access to digital resources such as the internet. Three out of four of people who were 'broadly' socially excluded lacked a meaningful engagement with the internet. In addition to this, people who were severely socially excluded, with no meaningful internet engagement, accounted for 10% of the total UK population.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Annual Minimum Income research<sup>7</sup> the public believe that having the internet at home is now essential for an acceptable standard of living.

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<sup>5</sup> The Internet in Britain: 2011, Oxford Internet Institute <http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/>

<sup>6</sup> Social Housing Providers and Digital Inclusion Strategy Group 2010 Action Plan [http://raceonline2012.org/sites/default/files/resources/social\\_housing\\_providers\\_digital\\_inclusion\\_action\\_plan\\_2010\\_-\\_final.pdf](http://raceonline2012.org/sites/default/files/resources/social_housing_providers_digital_inclusion_action_plan_2010_-_final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2011) A Minimum Income Standard for the UK in 2011, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/minimum-income-standard-uk-2011>

### 3. Who is at most risk of being digitally excluded?

Those most likely to be excluded from the benefits derived from accessing online services include<sup>8</sup>:

Low income households	In 2011, 57% of British households in the bottom income quintile did not have internet access at home. As social inequalities increase, internet use reduces <sup>9</sup> .
People with lower skills level	There is a great deal of variance in individuals' abilities to locate content online <sup>10</sup> . Hence, merely offering people a connected machine will not ensure that they can use the medium to meet their needs.
Older people	The internet may be perceived as a younger person's domain. Certainly, in the most recent Minimum Income Standard report <sup>11</sup> , computers with internet were seen as essential for households with working-age adults but not for pensioners. But many services, such as banking, telephones and utilities offer discounts for internet only users, so exclusion from these offers becomes an income and expenditure issue.
People with disabilities	Access to quality public services is of particular importance for those people with greater social needs. Those who have more social needs require more interaction with public services but are less likely to be digitally included. Enhanced working and environmental savings through more stimulating and flexible remote work practices could be seen as a key benefit of having vulnerable or more isolated groups digitally included.
The long term unemployed	Unemployed people who use online services can increase their chances of securing employment. People with good ICT skills earn between 3% and 10% more than people without such skills <sup>12</sup> .

<sup>8</sup> Foley, P et al (2005): eGovernment: Researching Socially Excluded Groups, <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/1123803>

<sup>9</sup> see footnote 3

<sup>10</sup> Hargittai E (2002), Second-level digital divide: differences in people's online skills, First Monday, Vol 7 No 4 [www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7\\_4/hargittai/index.html](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_4/hargittai/index.html).

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 3

<sup>12</sup> A race online: Why digital inclusion should be a key concern for every business contributing to the UK's digital economy [http://www.iabuk.net/media/images/raceonline\\_6945.pdf](http://www.iabuk.net/media/images/raceonline_6945.pdf)

#### 4. Promoting digital inclusion – benefits for landlords and tenants

With nearly a third of those who do not have access to the internet living in social housing<sup>13</sup>, landlords can play a key role in reaching and engaging digitally excluded people. For many landlords the use of technology has become an increasingly important way of delivering their services, for example expanding online services to include repair reporting, making rent payments and (for housing applicants) applying for a house.

<b>Benefits for Landlords</b>
Landlords can improve communication with tenants by opening up new channels of engagement e.g. consultations, satisfaction surveys and discussion forums.
Online communication may appeal to those who may not normally take part in consultations etc. as there is no requirement to be at a certain place at a certain time.
Online rent transaction can lower rent arrears and leads to faster and cheaper income collection processes.
Landlords can make properties more attractive if they are internet ready; costs could be included in the rent (sometimes referred to as a Tenant Broadband Service).
Offering tenants choices in how to access information and services will be seen to have more value for tenants, and acknowledges that landlords appreciate that their tenants are all different.
Cost savings: it has been estimated that up to £2 billion can be saved annually across the UK's public sector if just a third of contacts made by citizens were done digitally. Martha Lane Fox <sup>14</sup> encourages local government to build their digital capability in order to save money.
Landlords can transmit audio and video over the internet <sup>15</sup> .
<b>Benefits for Tenants</b>
Saving Money – offline households are missing out on an average saving of £560 per year from shopping and paying bills online.
Accessing services after office hours e.g. paying rent and reporting repairs.
Supporting tenants to learn IT skills makes them more employable.
Internet access could enable tenants to access documents such as their tenancy agreement/handbook or policy documents more easily.

Landlords are in a good position to encourage local communities to use their 'voice' to help shape local decision making by using online communication methods. Arguably there is an increasing expectation on social landlords to help their tenants with issues such as employment, access to training and social mobility: access to information technology is a key enabler in all these areas. Landlords are in a position

<sup>13</sup> Inclusive Policies and Actions  
<http://www.digitalregion.co.uk/public-sector/inclusive-policies>

<sup>14</sup> Martha Lane Fox: Inside Housing 06/09/2011;  
<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/digital-dawn/6517556.article?MsgId=35843>

<sup>15</sup> Moray Council webcast: <http://www.moray.public-i.tv/core/>

to support tenants by facilitating access, and by helping build the skills and confidence needed. As fixed line internet services are tied to a building rather than to a person, broadband provision could be seen as a *service* that landlords provide their tenants with.

The problem for tenants who do not have internet access is the cost of computer equipment and paying for the subscription which enables access. Purchasing internet access is difficult for people on low incomes: a phone line is usually required, adding further costs and requiring suitable credit ratings. Tenants must also navigate myriad tariffs, set-up charges and data allowances in choosing their service. These kinds of problems are not exclusive to social landlord tenants but also apply to private tenants.

The Department for Work and Pensions is committed to making the new Universal Credit from 2013 the first 'digital default'<sup>16</sup> service, with a target of 80% online claims. In CIH's view, this is highly ambitious but illustrates the importance of digital inclusion.

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<sup>16</sup> Universal Credit: Welfare that Works  
[www.dwp.gov.uk/universal-credit](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/universal-credit)



## 5. How can landlords promote digital inclusion?

There have been various levels of involvement from different local authorities and social landlords ranging from a fairly high level of intervention and low level basic intervention examples of such are illustrated in the table below. In Section 7 we provide actual examples of some of the activities.

Level of Activity	Example
High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opening up an existing pathfinder network and making it available to the wider community (seeks to provide WiFi services across the town centre by extending the current internal network facilities to external antennas)</li> <li>- Installing transmitters and receivers to enable WiFi access through code on bigger housing estates.</li> <li>- Community based internet access points.</li> </ul>
Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Carrying out surveys to determine the number of tenants who do not have access to the internet and to measure demand for such a service;</li> <li>- Providing private access in specialised housing/units; using bulk buy powers;</li> <li>- Providing training to tenants and others on internet use;</li> <li>- Carrying out structural surveys to determine if signals can reach particular styles of building;</li> <li>- Lending computer equipment;</li> <li>- Recycling computer equipment;</li> <li>- Using design specifications: a joint design guide has been produced which provides a framework for new build that individual members can adapt to suit their own requirements and reflect the needs of individual communities<sup>17</sup>.</li> </ul>
Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use of housing 'apps' to report repairs, pay rent etc. via the use of a mobile phone</li> <li>- Volunteer tutoring; provided by individuals who have IT skills which can be taught to those who lack IT skills</li> <li>- Asking telecom providers to provide quotes for the installation of cables during development stages of new builds.</li> </ul>

<sup>17</sup> Strathfor Housing Alliance

<http://sfha.co.uk/hst/archive/one-year-on-for-strath-for-housing-alliance/menu-id-29.html>

## 6. Some issues and challenges

### Being clear about aims and objectives

Where a social landlord wishes to promote digital inclusion among tenants and others in the local community, it is important that there is clarity about what the landlord is seeking to achieve. Some steps may simply be aimed at making it easier for people to gain internet access, which they can then use in the normal way for their general benefit and, one assumes, the benefit of the landlord. But in some cases a landlord may have a more specific objective, such as helping people gain employment, and in such cases it may be more likely for internet access to be limited in some way, not least as any abuse is likely to lead to very bad publicity for the landlord.

### Security

Hence, for many landlords, there may be concerns regarding online protection. To ensure online safety West Lothian Council use SIKA Solutions, which tracks internet activity and blocks any sites deemed to be inappropriate, and PCs are also password protected. West Lothian Council receive a monthly report from SIKA. SIKA Solutions<sup>18</sup> have experience in working in partnership with local authorities to provide safe internet access for vulnerable groups.

### Working with the industry

There is a clear need for communication between housing and telecom providers in order that each may begin to understand digital inclusion from both a marketing and social perspective. The position is more complex now that so many potential options exist in terms of suppliers. So, for example, if a social landlord seeks to work with a particular provider to invest in getting people connected, does this mean being tied to that supplier for broadband subscriptions into the future?

Inevitably, supply companies seeking an involvement in this area will be looking at longer term profitability, even where some initial support might be provided through its corporate social responsibility arm.

### Buildings and connectivity

Producers of new housing and those responsible for major refurbishment work could provide an infrastructure to enable connectivity to new information and communication technologies inside and outside the home.

Flatted developments and small affordable housing developments are both opportunities for social landlords or developers to incorporate internet access facilities on a shared and managed service basis, which could be more cost effective and a phone line in every property could be a goal. It seems odd in the extreme for

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<sup>18</sup> Vulnerable children are protected while using the Internet  
[http://www.netasq.com/shared/\\_pdf/naenust\\_sika-westlothian.pdf](http://www.netasq.com/shared/_pdf/naenust_sika-westlothian.pdf)

new or refurbished housing to be provided in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without any facilitation of internet access.

In some cases, cableways can be provided at little or no additional cost. However, the routing of these must be carefully planned by a professional qualified to design a system that will meet a wide range of potential user needs. New skills may be needed within many social landlords, particularly in understanding user requirements and in integrating and installing systems.

### Mobile phones

The mobile phone will help to close the digital divide further – internet via the mobile is now a reality, and mobiles are almost everywhere. There are a number of housing applications available to download for educational purposes, tenancy sustainment and more effective service delivery.

## 7. Examples of Good Practice

### *8(a) Promoting Digital Inclusion*

**Falkirk Council – Has worked across departments to ensure the sustainability of the Dawson Centre Internet Café (Regener8). Falkirk Council also installs phone lines in all new builds.**

In 2003, as part of a wider regeneration project in the area of Bainsford and Langlees, a number of flats were converted into a community facility, including an internet café. The age range of users was 12-25 years. The users chose the name “Regener8” for the Internet Café.

As demand for housing increased in Langlees, the flats which had previously been vacant could now be taken back as housing stock. Community groups were anxious about the possibility of losing the facility. Following negotiations with other departments within Falkirk Council, in 2010 the internet café was relocated to a nearby community centre in a more accessible location, the Dawson Community Campus. This location has Wi-Fi and enables a wireless connection to 6 in-house laptops and 2 PC's. Residents can also bring along their own laptop and enter a WiFi code to gain internet access. Many community groups use the internet café in allotted times, but the centre is seen by residents as a ‘drop in’ which offers many other services.

The internet café has strong links with the local school. A path to the Community Campus has been constructed directly from the school. This encourages young people to come and use the facility to help them with homework, coursework and online applications for jobs and further education. Staff who manage the centre adhere to an internet use policy which conforms to Falkirk Council standards. Parents and children have been involved in various workshops covering topics such as security and privacy settings; children must bring signed permission forms from parents to show they approve of children using the internet.

The hardware and software is maintained by Falkirk Council's IT department. Community consultation was key to the success of this project.

As another contribution to enhancing digital inclusion, Falkirk Council has installed phone lines in all its new builds. This is intended to help address problems arising for tenants who may be unable to get a broadband service. This is often due to the requirement for a phone line, which can be difficult for some tenants if there is a lack of credit history and bank account.

**West Lothian Council – Provides internet access in a specialist family unit, ensuring that tenants using their service have access to the internet as part of needs assessments and service delivery**

Strathbrock Family Unit accommodates eight families who require additional support in terms of managing their tenancies and lifestyle. The facility has a computer suite which enables internet access to tenants and their children from four PCs, with tenants able to access the suite between 9am and 9pm. To ensure online safety West Lothian Council use SIKA Solutions, which tracks internet activity and blocks any sites deemed to be inappropriate. PCs are also password protected.

SIKA Solutions, from whom the Council receives a monthly report, have experience in working in partnership with local authorities by providing safe internet access for vulnerable groups. For young people, being online is both a valuable educational tool and a social network. Not being online could mean people can't connect, share, express or communicate as others do.

For families at Strathbrock who are already facing a host of challenges, having access to the internet and the 'normality' it confers is important. Some tenants come from out-with West Lothian and can easily begin to feel isolated. Access to the internet enables them to communicate with friends and family in their home town, and this helps the tenant settle better. Many tenants require counselling, which can also be done through online 'chat' facilities. Tenants have also used the suite to look for employment and apply for courses at college. Youngsters are able to use the internet to complete homework assignments and have a dedicated slot to do so. The unit also provides training for tenants who are less confident using a PC and accessing the internet.

Tenants are able to use the internet to look for accommodation: West Lothian Council actively encourages landlords to advertise their properties on the WLC web portal. Tenants are able to access this portal to look for accommodation in the private sector. Tenants are able to purchase items online and have these items delivered to the unit under the supervision of support workers who assist with budgeting and the purchase of essentials for a house. Many tenants use 'Gumtree' to purchase larger items on a budget.

**Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) – Aims to have 30,000 of their 46,000 properties connectable or connected to the internet by 2014**

Glasgow Housing Association's commitment is to promote cost effective digital inclusion, increasing easy access to services for thousands of tenants who do not currently use the internet, thereby making it easier for them to engage with GHA and with services offered by their partners. The programme will provide affordable broadband with the key objectives of improving educational attainment and improving employability through the ability to work from home and gain easier access to job adverts. Additional outcomes include:

- Improved access to health care through telecare/telemedicine
- Improved empowerment through service choice

- Better outcomes for tenants, including a target of 50% transactions online by 2013/14.

Partners include:

- Glasgow City Council (Education, Social Work, Community Planning)
- Scottish Government (benefits to education)
- Greater Glasgow Health Board (benefits could include e-health, access to primary care - GP, District Nurse)
- Other RSLs.

The need for the project is based on the results of tenant satisfaction surveys which showed that 23% of tenants use the internet daily, with a further 7% using it once a week. These results reflected similar findings in a recent Ofcom report, which identified that coverage for broadband was well developed in urban areas but that user take up in Glasgow was amongst the lowest in the UK and had not increased since the previous report two years ago. The position of the Greater Glasgow area was particularly highlighted with take up currently at 50%.

GHA began the connection journey by carrying out a feasibility study to demonstrate which of their properties could receive a signal. The connectivity of its multi-storey buildings was identified as a potential problem, and a detailed study of a sample of construction types was undertaken to confirm signal strength in these properties, taking account of the physical infrastructure and wiring configurations.

The procurement process for infrastructure upgrade and end user services began in September 2011 and it is expected that the tendering process will be completed by spring 2012. Whereas this work stream will deliver the physical infrastructure, the realisation of GHA's aspirations will include a great deal of partnership working. In a wider action role GHA will work closely with partners across the city to support tenants and their families to access online information as part of its contribution to better lives and better educational attainment for children.

In addition GHA is developing its online services to expand the opportunities and choices for tenants to access their services on a regular basis at times which suit them. GHA is working in partnership with Citizens Online, a charity engaged in developing and delivering digital inclusion programmes across the UK.

This collaborative project, which sees a member of Citizens Online staff seconded to GHA for 6 months from September 2011, is intended to build on its existing empowerment and engagement strategy, aiming to raise awareness of how individual and community use of Broadband can bring social and economic benefits. The target is to support the development of a wider digital inclusion strategy encouraging up to 2,000 tenants and residents over the next three years to become digitally aware and included, and to support them through training and development to be able to regularly use the internet.

## **Ayrshire North Community Housing Organisation (ANCHO) – Have two community based internet cafés which cater for different age groups and purposes**

ANCHO is a housing association based on Glasgow's Clyde Coast, managing 700 homes. In 2009 the organisation carried out a tenant survey, with results demonstrating that 37% of respondents had access to the internet. There were clear trends in respect of age, with tenants aged less than 55 years of age most likely to have access. The Community Link Project (CLP) offers a community based free internet service, which is managed and maintained by ANCHO. There are seven PCs which connect to the internet via Wi-Fi, with the server located at ANCHO main offices.

Having access to the internet in the community from this facility has enabled residents to look for and secure employment, and younger residents have been able to complete homework assignments. The facility is also used for social networking, ensuring that ANCHO workers have regular contact with residents. Staff offer training to those less familiar with computers and also provide assistance to those applying for jobs: the CLP regularly receives referrals from the Jobcentre.

The environment is informal and offers free coffee, ensuring that users feel as comfortable as they would in their own homes. Since ANCHO own the property there are no rental charges, only basic revenue costs. The CLP is well advertised within the community through leaflet drops and a banner outside the building, and opening times are advertised in the local newspaper. Access to the internet is protected by a code, which ensures that the signal does not go beyond a specific point. An after school homework club is also up and running.

Staff report that up 40 residents use the facility on a weekly basis, not including those who attend after school. Within walking distance of the CLP there is another facility specifically for young residents in the area, which enables young people to access the internet on a drop in basis: four PCs are available free of charge, sharing a connection with the CLP. Given that young children and teenagers are using the internet, various sites are password protected. Software is installed to ensure that settings are set back to default. This facility is also community based: young people and workers here generate their own funds to ensure the sustainability of the project but have also received funding from a number of sources.

## **Ochil View, Rural Stirling and Forth Housing Associations – Use a local design guide to specify line connections in new builds**

The Strathfor design guide for new build homes covers specifications for communication equipment, including that a system should be fully installed and ready for a telecom company to make final connections in each dwelling, and to provide:

- A single telephone jack outlet point in the hall and living room of each dwelling, located adjacent to one of the double wall sockets
- In dwellings with three or more bedrooms, an additional telephone single jack outlet must be provided in the main bedroom

- In elderly amenity and wheelchair user dwellings, an additional single telephone jack outlet in the main bedroom.

Each installation comprises high impact PVC conduit with telephone multi-core cable from the incoming connection point to the single jack outlet in the living room of each dwelling and, where appropriate, to the additional outlet in the master bedroom.

### **West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative – Provide an affordable broadband service to tenants**

West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative set up a stand alone community owned co-operative called Whitcomm Co-operative Ltd in 2009. This co-operative provides broadband services to its members whilst giving the control to the local users through a management committee made up entirely of community customers. It provides its members with phone and broadband services for approximately £26pcm. The service has been up and running since the end of 2009, with 100 of its 644 properties connected, with a view to upgrading the remaining 544 properties if capital funding becomes available. Currently 72 of the 100 tenants make use of the service.

A “fibre to the home” network was installed during the development stages of new build housing. Broadband has been bulk purchased at a low cost from a telecom provider.

Members of Whitcomm Co-op are also able to take advantage of low cost telephone calls through VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol): this service enables members to make unlimited phone calls by connecting via broadband to a VoIP adaptor, provided by Whitcomm. VoIP turns a voice into data packets and sends them instantly over an existing broadband network to the person being called. The call receiver notices nothing different: they still hear the caller’s voice as normal. The call quality will be very similar to, or the same as, that of any landline service.

Members are able to make cheap international calls and can take their adaptor abroad to make calls as if from their landline. This has reduced the phone costs of a number of members.

Originally Whitcomm Co-op had provided internet access through IPTV (Internet Provision over Television) to all new build tenants, allowing for Freeview channels and internet access using a keyboard and set top box over the new fibre optic network for free. This made it convenient for those tenants who did not own a computer or laptop, but uptake on this pilot was poor, and the committee decided to withdraw this service and concentrate on phone and broadband services.

In developing Whitcomm Co-op, WWHC has taken a pragmatic view of online protection, in that sites are not filtered and activity is not monitored. Members have been made aware that Whitcomm Co-op is an ethical provider.

Whitcomm committee agreed to operate an arrears policy which is proactive in ensuring that members are not able to get into arrears. If this does happen, broadband services are suspended until payment is made. Unlike other broadband



providers Whitcomm Co-op does not issue tenants with a 12 or 18 month binding contract, but prefers to be flexible, as members might want to ask for the service to be cut off at any time and reconnected at a time that is convenient for them.

### **North Lincolnshire Homes – Have set up a trial broadband service involving 100 tenants**

The objective of the trial broadband service, which ends in January 2012, is to test that broadband connections are working reliably. Results will determine whether or not broadband will be provided more widely. During the trial internet access will be free.

The ethos behind this trial is to help create strong and successful communities by getting more tenants online and accessing the internet. The aim is to provide a broadband connection in 100 homes free of charge between August 2011 and January 2012. The broadband service will use WiMAX technology (this is wireless and does not require a phone line). The connection is provided via a small receiver dish fitted onto the roof, or through a portable dongle. Tenants are asked to provide feedback on the service, reliability and speed. Tenants taking part will not be charged for access during the trial. During the trial a helpdesk will be set up for tenants having difficulties. Since this trial monitors a broadband service, computers and laptops will not be provided, but North Lincolnshire Homes will provide tenants who wish to take part with information as to how they would be able to source reconditioned equipment.

### **Blackwood Homes – Facilitating internet use**

Blackwood Homes wish to pilot internet access for tenants in Broom Court, Stirling, where there is an active tenants' organisation. Five reconditioned PCs have been donated and will be placed in a communal lounge area. Blackwood Homes are keen to provide internet access to tenants, and see the clear benefits in terms of online consultation and networking. Blackwood Homes have been in contact with a tenant broadband service. This service enables landlords to provide internet access to tenants without investment in additional staff and systems, offering additional value to tenants and additional revenues to landlords.

In order to engage with tenants who already have internet access the association have also created a webpage for tenants and will use this as a discussion forum, created exclusively for Blackwood Homes tenants and staff, similar to Facebook only more private in that the page is not made public and is password protected. This will enable the Association to get direct feedback from tenants in real time. The page will be audio enabled and will allow for video upload: it is intended that the Association will use this facility to help distribute the tenant's handbook in an alternative format.

A webpage currently under construction aims to engage tenants with adaptation suppliers and also allows for tenants to be consulted on new products and give ideas. This page is not exclusively for the use of Blackwood Homes tenants: tenants

with impairments are invited to make contributions and join discussion forums, and there is also a facility for members to create their own forum.

**Berwickshire Housing Association** – Provide wireless connections in its sheltered housing and also provide laptops for tenants to use. Previously they completed a project whereby pupils from a nearby school were taken to Boston Court, Duns, to work on a one to one basis with some of the residents to teach them how to access the internet and look at different sites. The success of this led to the development of the wireless connections.

#### *8(b) Innovative use of websites and other communication tools*

**Parkhead Housing Association** – Have carried out a survey to determine which of their tenants do not have internet access, and are considering using social media as a tool to engage with their tenants

Parkhead Housing Association (PHA) have produced a Social Media Discussion Paper in order that the association can determine how to use social networking sites as a way to further engage with tenants who already have internet access. The intention is to use Facebook to interact with and provide information to tenants. PHA is in the process of compiling guidance for staff. Like many housing providers PHA provides an online service which enables tenants to report repairs, and pay their rent. PHA intends to ask tenants whether and how they access the internet: the results will inform a digital inclusion strategy. PHA has recently purchased a commercial property with intentions to develop this into a community facility which will have internet access.

With PHA managed by a board predominantly made up of tenants, the intention is to open a board members' page on their website to enable members to access documentation and communicate with each other. PHA is keen to provide board members with IT equipment to ensure there are no barriers to accessing the webpage. There are moves to have AGMs through video conference and have these posted on YouTube to enable tenants to view these. PHA is one of many associations building new social housing, which will have a phone line installed to enable access to the internet.

**Yorkshire Coast Homes** – Use text messages to contact tenants about rent arrears and repairs

For many years, some social landlords have been sending repairs appointment confirmations to tenants via text messages, and organisations that have used the tool report significant reductions in missed appointments, coupled with increased customer satisfaction. Some customers may not own a mobile phone. Yorkshire Coast Homes are also exploring the possibility of including a pay-as-you-go phone in their new tenant packages to encourage engagement.

This service is already helping save on the cost of distributing letters and it frees up employees' time to focus on other tasks by automatically recording contact with

customers. By using text messaging to inform tenants early of rent arrears, there has been an increase in the number of tenants who have dropped into the office to discuss and manage their debt, and also an increase in tenants paying off arrears.

**East Lothian Housing Association** – Make extensive use of their website ([www.elha.com](http://www.elha.com)) and report very high usage among tenants. Tenants can report repairs, pay rent, make housing applications and download key documents such as the tenancy agreement. There is also an “online housing office” enabling tenants to “chat” with a member of staff at specific times during the week.

**Moray Council** – make use of web casts to enable tenants and members of the public to view committee meetings. Through the use of an internet connection and Windows Media Player meetings can be viewed live from the home/office. Should someone miss a meeting or want to see a specific section of the meeting again, these can be retrieved through an archive of webcasts. The archives allow for the use of the index points, enabling the viewer to jump to a specific agenda point or speaker.

**Linc-Cymru Housing Association** – Use ‘My Tenancy’ - an internet based system that provides tenants with secure access to their rent and repair information held within the Linc-Cymru Pyramid Housing Management System. Security is provided. Rent Statements can be viewed, and work tracked from start to finish. Family details will be viewable, and can be updated online to ensure tenants receive the correct benefits.

**Linkwide** – Have a ‘Tenant Zone’ webpage, whereby users are able to access links to customer satisfaction surveys, tenant conferences, weather advice, and tenancy management information. The webpage has a text to speech facility.

**Key Housing Association** – Have made their tenant handbook and agreement available online, enabling tenants to listen to rather than read these documents.

### *8(c) Housing ‘Apps’*

**TenantBook** – Used in a similar way to Facebook. Aimed at tenants and housing practitioners. Users can share news, have discussions, answer and ask questions and socialise with others involved with or living in social housing. TenantBook has 630 members and is growing. Accessed via: <http://tenantbook.co.uk/what-is-tenantbook>

**iHobo** – Developed by Depaul UK, the largest youth homeless charity in the UK. This ‘app’ can be used as an educational tool to give users an idea of the issues homeless people face on a daily basis, such as a lack of food, shelter emotional support and healthcare. The ‘app’ is functional for 3 days, day and night. Users are sent alerts when the homeless person is in trouble and needs help. There is an option to donate to the charity. The ‘app’ also provides the users with various facts relating to homelessness. It can be accessed at: <http://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/ihobo/id364005732?mt=8#>

**My Council Services UK** – Free consumer ‘app’ used to report problems in the local area to the council by phone. Available to use with: iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad. Users are able to report issues like litter, flytipping, potholes, abandoned vehicles, refuse problems, dog fouling, and much more. Users need to fill in their region and council, along with their name and contact details, and are then able to access contact details for their council easily, making reporting an issue simple. Users are able to describe the location of the issue, categorise it and take a photo or video, and then submit it. A history of reported problems appears on the home page: by default all councils will receive the report by email. This means the council will receive messages, but if it wants to manage them, it will have to pay a fee to download the software. This can be accessed at <http://www.mycouncilservices.com/>