



Business case

Housing Services – Purchase of a new temporary accommodation rent accounting module and an upgrade to the existing Abritas Housing Services system to assist homelessness prevention & relief administration

Release	Draft
Date	09/09/2019
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Client	Service lead
Project Ref #	

Business case history

Document location

This document is only valid on the day it was printed.
The source of the document will be found in location:

Revision history

Date of this revision: 09/09/2019
Date of next revision:

Revision date	Last revision date	Summary of changes
	0.1	Add rows as required, first version is version 0.1, increment drafts as 0.2, 0.3 etc, when agreed published (non draft version is 1.0, and any further changes increment from here)

Approvals

This document requires the following approvals:

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Business case

1. Purpose of document

The purpose of this project document is to outline the details of the two aspects of the Housing Services ICT project. These are the replacement of the existing Academy/Capita Housing rent accounting system and an Abritas system upgrade from version 6.4 to version 9.0 with associated enhancements, prior to the separation of the East Surrey sub-regional partnership.

Both aspect of the ICT project are directly related to homelessness and temporary accommodation and support better and more efficient ways of working. These will significantly help reduce the administrative burdens related to the Homeless Reduction Act.

The document will explain the reasons to undertake the project, provided estimated cost of the project and the anticipated benefits to us and the customer that will be gained from its implementation.

2. Background & Reason for the Project

Rent Accounting System

Housing Services currently uses two IT systems. Academy/Capita Housing was purchased in 2003/4 and Abritas Choice Based Lettings in 2008. (Abritas was procured jointly with three other East Surrey authorities through OJEU.) Further Abritas modules for the Housing Register, Advice, Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation were procured in 2016/17 and the Homeless Reduction Act (HRA) module in 2018.

Following the purchase of the additional Abritas modules in 2016/17 the Academy/Capita system is currently only used for rent accounting. Due to historic issues the functionality for arrears management is very poor and the system is no longer fit for purpose.

The system administration, maintenance and upgrades of the Academy/Capita system are complex and time consuming for both Housing & ICT staff. The support costs are disproportionate for our use at approx. £12,000 pa.

The Academy/Capita system was upgraded in September 2017. Following this upgrade it has not been possible for ICT to roll out the system to Housing Services users. As a result, Housing Services only have access to the system via a remote connection to a PC based in ICT. This only allows one user to access the system at any one time. Following protracted calls logged with their help desk/support services Academy/Capita have now advised that they can no longer support our operating system. The current version is being decommissioned in December 2019, which would require migration to their OPEN house system.

As a result Housing Services are currently having to seek an alternative software provider for a rent accounting system. However the majority of rent accounting systems on the market are linked to property and estate management systems where the minimum use is 5000-10,000 properties and the costs of these systems are prohibitive. Housing Services currently managed less than 100 temporary accommodation properties/rent accounts.

We are not unique in Surrey as many of the councils who transferred their housing stock still manage a small number of temporary accommodation units. There is a very limited market of ICT providers who offer small-scale rent accounting systems. A market appraisal has identified that we only have two options. These are the purchase of the Abritas Tenancy and Rents module or a bespoke Access system designed by EEBC ICT staff. However ICT are unlikely to have the resources and time scales to develop this and it will not be able to offer the same functionality and benefits of the Abritas Tenancy and Rents module.

Abritas systems upgrade from version 6.4 to 9.0

The current version of Abritas system (v6.4) was procured on a sub-regional basis with Mole Valley, Tandridge and Reigate & Banstead Councils in 2008.

Further Abritas modules were procured for the Housing Register, Advice, Homeless and Temporary Accommodation in 2016/17 and the HRA module in 2018.

Whilst additional modules have been purchased the overall operating system has not been upgraded in 11 years. Housing Services are currently using version 6.4 and the latest version is 9.0.

The main reason was that all four local authority partners had to agree to the upgrade and consensus could not be reached.

The current version whilst still functional is becoming obsolete, for example the system is web based and can only operate using internet Explorer 7 however this is no longer supported by Abritas.

In addition we have been unable to take advantage of any new system functionality/enhancements rolled out and supported within later system release versions.

The current situation is that the sub-regional partnership has been dissolved and the other partners now want to separate out their systems. This is in itself a large task. Reigate and Banstead BC will no longer be using Abritas however Tandridge DC, Mole Valley DC and EEBC will continue to.

This presents the remaining partners with an ideal opportunity to jointly upgrade prior to the separation of the systems. By doing so we can share costs of the upgrade and have the benefits of rolling this out as a shared project.

The implementation of the Tenancies & Rents module and the upgrade would run concurrently.

3. Objectives

- Obtain S&R approval to use the MHCLG Homelessness grant to fund the purchase of the Tenancies & Rents module and upgrade
- Purchase Abritas Tenancies & Rents module to replace the current Academy rent accounting system
- Cancel Capita/Academy Housing contract along with associated support costs of £12,000 pa
- Upgrade the current version of the Abritas system from version 6.4 to 9.0 as part of a joint upgrade prior to the separation of the East Surrey sub-regional partnership
- Implement new functionality & enhancements to improve service delivery, especially for homelessness administration
- Separate the existing system from the East Surrey sub-regional partnership.

4. Success

- An upgraded, enhanced and fully integrated Housing ICT system that includes the Tenancies & Rents module, implemented by the end of financial year 2019/20 and delivered within budget.

5. ICT Scope

Abritas Tenancies & Rents module

The purchase of the Abritas Tenancies & Rents module offer the following functionality:

Fully integrated to all existing modules

The Tenancies & Rents module is fully integrated with all existing Abritas modules but particularly with the Homelessness module. This allows easy management of the financial aspects of temporary accommodation tenancies.

The module can be used by the whole team, which will reduce reliance on one officer and SPOF issues.

Under the Homelessness module, for case management /statistical purposes, temporary accommodation placements are already created and all temporary accommodation properties are currently set up on the system. Therefore the creation of a tenancy & associated rent account would be a very straight forward and seamless follow on process.

Rent Accounting

The Tenancies & Rents module uses double entry accounting and shows payment sources to indicate whether the payment has come from the tenant, Housing Benefit (HB) or Universal Credit (UC).

Tenancies can be created both in the past and the future and start and end dates can be changed as required to charge part periods.

The system allows for different hierarchy of accounts so charges can be made for rent & services, storage costs, loans for deposits and rent in advance.

Rent statements can be easily viewed and generated and can be accessed by the whole team.

The system works on a 52 week continual year which means that there is no complex end of year process and reconciliation reports can be generated for any period.

Arrears Management

Due to faults with the existing Academy system rent arrears management is currently extremely difficult, very time consuming and is not effective. This is one of the main business reasons for a new module. Housing Services staff are constantly dependant on “fixes and work arounds” just to undertake very basic rent accounting and arrears functions.

With the Abritas Tenancies & Rents module the arrears process is managed through clear workflows that includes automatic letter creation at any point in the arrears process.

Flexible arrears monitoring reports can be generated using the built in reporting tools. These reports quickly highlight arrears cases which require action.

Repayment agreements can be created for tenants that are in arrears, and the system will then highlight those agreements in the workflow that are not being met.

Interface of cash & housing benefit payments

In 2018/19 £350,000 in Housing Benefit & £131,000 in cash payments were processed through Housing Services.

The existing Academy system currently only interfaces with Housing Benefit and all cash payments have to be manually input on a weekly basis. This is extremely time consuming, open to error and it is difficult to reconcile payments effectively.

The Abris Tenancies & Rents module would create interfaces to enable cash payments from Civica Pay and housing benefit payments to be loaded into the system automatically on a daily basis.

This would create more efficient & regular cash importing which will reduce staff inputting times and be less prone to errors. Tenant rent accounts would be current on a daily rather than weekly basis.

Unit costs

The Abris Tenancies & Rents module includes functionality to allow staff record details of costs (e.g. repairs, redecoration, damage, recharges) incurred against properties in order to keep track and monitor costs. A configurable unit cost report gives an overview of cost totals.

This is useful for PSL recharges to landlords/tenants and for financial analysis of costs associated with EEBC owned properties.

Rent Deposit Scheme (RDS)

Rent Deposit Scheme information is currently only recorded on an excel spreadsheet and there is no central system for recording cases or managing data or finances.

The Rent Deposit functionality allows applications to be tracked within the system and contains set workflows to allow for the management of Rent Deposit applications and the recording of property, landlord and financial information.

This functionality would also have the ability to record and manage loans for rent in advance and cash deposit payments, which could reduce expenditure for the RDS.

Configuration/Set up

The Tenancies & Rents module is relatively straightforward to configure and set up, especially as the council's Temporary accommodation property data base has already been set up on the system under the Homelessness module. Configuration will be centred on our rent charging structure.

Upgrade from version 6.4 to 9.0

Epsom & Ewell Borough Councils version of the Abris operating system has not been upgraded in 11 years. Housing Services are currently using version 6.4 and the latest version is 9.0.

The current version whilst still functional is becoming obsolete, for example the system is web based and can only operate using internet Explorer 7, however this is no longer supported by Abris.

In addition we have been unable to take advantage of any new system functionality/enhancements rolled out and supported within later system release versions.

The upgrade to version 9.0 includes a number of new system functions and enhancements as standard. The following are highlighted as having a particular business use to Housing Services:

Customised personal data management (GDPR)

The data retention functionality is designed to comply with government regulations regarding the retention of our customer's personal data. The system will automatically identify applications where personal data should no longer normally be retained and flag them in an

exception report and on the applicant's Household page. After a grace period, during which the data can be flagged to be retained if required, the personal data held against the application is automatically wiped.

Records are identified for removal based on a standard set of rules, one for each application/record type in the system. Each data management rule can be fully customised to suit the council's own data retention policy. Expiry dates can be added to attachments and generated letter records, after which, they will be identified for deletion and then wiped.

User interface

The back office user interface has been modernised providing a more innovative and user-friendly experience.

Browser Support

The back office fully supports Microsoft Internet Explorer versions 9, 10 & 11. Support has also been added for Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox, Safari, Edge.

Mobile Devices

Extending support to Safari will enable Housing Options Officers to use mobile devices while interviewing customers. This will help speed up data input and save from double keying. More importantly, it will allow Personalised Housing Plans to be compiled, generated and printed as part of the interview process. This will significantly simplify a complex process brought in by the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Actions & Pop-up reminders

This allows the creation of actions and Pop-up reminders against any process within the system.

In the system you add the reminder from the CRM screen against any process, assign it to a back-office user for a date and time; when that user next logs in to the Abritas system and the reminder is due a pop-up will appear. This reminder pop-up can be dismissed, rescheduled or 'snoozed'.

SMS bidding & Bulk messaging

The bulk messaging functionality allows Housing Services staff to send messages to a selection of applicants en masse. Each message can be sent via text, email, to the client website, or a combination of the three.

SMS bidding is an automated text service that allows applicants to place bids by sending an SMS to a specified number. They are sent a response informing them of their queue position if their bid is successful, or the reason why they are ineligible for the property.

Audit tool

Senior managers can use this functionality to audit a random selection of Homelessness cases. Users can select a percentage of cases within a specified date range, and workflow exists to manage the audit process.

Upgraded Customer Housing Portal

The current client interface with the Housing Services system is via the Customer Housing Portal (CHP) through the Epsom and Ewell HomeChoice website. Via this site clients can complete on-line Housing Needs Register applications, bid for CBL properties, use the housing options wizard and message Housing Services staff.

The look and feel of the Customer Housing Portal has been updated and has increased functionality as outlined below:

Customer Document upload

This allows applicants to upload proofs/documents as part of the application process. Once submitted attachments will appear in the back office system for staff to verify once they have passed a virus scanning check.

This will enable customers to upload certain documents/proofs via the CHP, which will speed up processing time for both Housing Needs Register and Homelessness cases.

Customer viewing and updating of Personalised Housing Plans (PHP)

The Customer Housing Portal has the functionality to allow customers to view and update their Personalised Housing Plans. This will reduce risk of data breaches and significantly reduce the administration currently required by the Housing Options Officers. Legislation requires that PHPs are reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Currently this can only be done by Housing Options Officers in the back office and is time consuming. You cannot move a case on in the system until the PHP has been have updated. The ability to allow customers to do this themselves will also have the benefit of better engagement with the Homelessness prevention process.

6. Stakeholders

Key project stakeholders & their potential role on the project:

- Project sponsor - Rod Brown
- Project manager – Annette Snell
- Partners - MVDC & TDC
- ICT – Guidance & ICT and new ways of working governance group
- Senior supplier – Abritas
- Legal – Contracts
- Procurement – Guidance on G-Cloud procurement
- Finance

7. Benefits

The following benefits have been identified:

Tenancies & Rents module

- A fully functional rent accounting and rent arrears system, which is integrated into the existing homelessness module and with Housing Benefit & Cash interfaces
- More efficient/regular cash importing which will reduce staff inputting times and is less prone to errors
- More efficient rent arrears handling which will reduce debts owed to the council and free up staff resources
- Better management reporting on rental income, arrears and unit cost data
- New Rent Deposit functionality for the management of Rent Deposit applications and recording of property, landlord and financial information.
- Ability to manage loans for rent in advance/deposit payments, which could reduce expenditure for the RDS.
- Abritas is a web-based system, which requires minimal ICT input unlike the current Capita/ Academy system.
- Cancelling the Capita/ Academy contract would save £12,000 pa in support costs and reduce the dependency on ICT staff for upgrades/system management/support.
- Increase staff morale in having an effective system that is not dependant on “fixes and work arounds” just to undertake very basic rent accounting functions.

- System that the whole Housing Services team can use, which will reduce reliance on one officer and any associated SPOF issues.

System Upgrade

- Shared & reduce costs of the upgrade and benefits of shared project management with MVDC & TDC
- System upgrade will increase longevity/viability of the whole system and enable us make use of new system functionality/enhancements
- Customer data management functionality that is automated, compliant with GDPR and can be customised to suit our particular data retention policies
- Improved customer interface through the upgraded Customer Housing Portal (CHP)
- Housing Options Officers will be able to use mobile devices while interviewing customers. This will help speed up data input, save from double keying and will allow Personalised Housing Plans to be compiled, generated and printed as part of the interview process
- Functionality to allow customers to view and update their Personalised Housing Plans via CHP. This will reduce risk of data breaches and significantly reduce the administration currently required by Housing Options Officers. This will also have the benefit of better customer engagement with the Homelessness prevention process.
- Ability for customers to upload certain documents/proofs via the CHP.

Adverse effects

No adverse effects for the council have been identified. Implementation of the new module and upgrade are relatively straightforward, mainly involving a small number of the Housing Services team. There has been a proven track record of implementing and delivering similar ICT projects within Housing Services on time and within budget.

8. Costs

The costs associated with the purchase of the Tenancy and Rents Module and the upgrade to version 9.0 are set out below along with future additional annual costs. By undertaking this as a joint project with Mole Valley & Tandridge District Councils there are costs savings to be made as some of the costs are shared. For example in 2017 Abritas quoted £29,000 for the Tenancy and Rents Module and we have now negotiated a figure of £17,800.

Purchasing this module would mean we would no longer be required to pay approx. £12, 000 pa in support costs to Academy/Capita.

The project will also include the work associated with separating out of the four local authorities systems and any individual customisation.

Item	Shared Cost	EEBC
INITIAL COSTS		
TENANCY AND RENTS MODULE	Yes	£13,550
Cash interface		£1,250
Housing Benefit interface		£1,750
Training - 2 day mandatory per partner		£1,250
TOTAL		£17,800

ADDITIONAL ANNUAL COSTS	Shared Cost	EEBC
HOSTING		
Tenancy and Rents Module		£1000
SUPPORT & MAINTENANCE		
Tenancy and Rents Module		£3000
TOTAL		£4000

Item	Shared Cost	EEBC
INITIAL COSTS		
UPGRADE		
Upgrade - implementation management	Yes	£3,333
Upgrade – development	Yes	£4,000
Upgrade - User acceptance testing	Yes	£3,000
Training - 1 day mandatory per partner	Yes	£1,000
Mobile phone (SMS) bidding service setup	Yes	£500
Unit cost reporting	Yes	£2,000
Customised tenancy data recording	Yes	£500
Customer Housing Portal Implementation	No	£15,400
Implementation of website customisations	Yes	£5,000
Administration and CMS training	Yes	£333
Customer Document Upload	Yes	£5,950
Rent deposit applications	Yes	£1000
Customised data management	Yes	£667
Bulk messaging	Yes	£783
Household tenancies	Yes	£1,000
Non-standard items		
Removal of the shared 'Sub Regional' and all remaining calculations associated to Reigate & Banstead Allocation schemes	Yes	£667
TOTAL		£45,133

ADDITIONAL ANNUAL COSTS	Shared Cost	EEBC
SUPPORT & MAINTENANCE		
Customer Document Upload		£880
SMS		
Fee for SMS bulk messaging/bidding (includes 5000 messages) in total across all partners	Yes	£167
TOTAL		£1,047

For the enhancement to our existing system the figures quoted are in addition to those already being charged for existing modules.

Procurement & Contracts

The intention is to procure the new module and upgrade using the Crown Commercial Services G-Cloud 11 framework. Previous modules were procured using this method. The Housing Operations Manager has experience of this and it is a relative quick and straightforward process.

The existing contract will be renewed and brought into one agreement. All current invoices will be aligned into one annual invoice.

9. Timescales

Time scales for implementation are dependent on final approval of S& R Committee on 24 September. However the intention is that both aspects of this project will be implemented by the end of the financial year 2019/20.

Following G-Cloud procurement a full implementation scope will be agreed with detailed timescales.

The implementation of the new module and upgrade is relatively straightforward, mainly involving a small number of the Housing Services team. Housing Services & Abritas have a proven track record of implementing and delivering similar ICT projects on time and within budget.

It is proposed that the following timescales will be achievable:

Milestone	Dates (estimates)
Scoping & business case	Jul- Aug- 2019
ICT and new ways of working governance group	10 Sept 2019
S&R Committee	24 September 2019
Procurement & contracts	October 2019
Works Order signed	October 2019
Configuration Definition	Nov 2019
Upgrade Development	Nov 2019 – Feb 2020
User Acceptance Testing (UAT)	Feb 2020
Training	March 2020
System Delivery	March 2020

10. Risks

In summary the main risks are as follows:

Risks of not going ahead with the project.

The current rent accounting systems is not fit for purpose and needs to be replaced. Failure to proceed would leave Housing Services without a Rent Accounting system and an inability to manage temporary accommodation tenancies and associated rental income of over £480,000 pa.

The current proposal to upgrade the system is link to the separation of the existing East Surrey sub-regional partnership. If the upgrade was not undertaken at the same time with the partners Housing Services would be reliant on a system that had not been upgraded for 11 years and would still need to upgrade the system within the next 12 months. However we would then not be able to take advantage of the shared costs and project management. We would also still be required to pay the costs of separating out the systems.

Risks that will need to be addressed if the recommended option goes ahead

Risk	Date identified	Identified by	Impact	Probability	Risk management plan	Current status
MVDC & TDC decide not to proceed with project	09/09/2019	AS	Medium	Low	MVDC & TDC are further advance with project than EEBC. Joint project working to mitigate risk	Active
Abritas unable to deliver on time due to initial project delays	09/09/2019	AS	Medium	Low	Adhere to project plan	Active
Key staff recourses are deployed to other service priorities	09/09/2019	AS	Medium	Low	Adhere to project plan	Active

11. Dependencies

This project depends on:

- Approval by Better ways of working group on 10 September 2019
- Funding approval by S&R Committee on 24 September 2019
- Inter dependencies on Mole Valley and Tandridge District Councils

Key resource dependencies:

Implementation of the new module and upgrade are relatively straightforward, mainly involving a small number of the Housing Services team. Project lead will be Annette Snell, Housing Operations Manager. Dammika Vithanage, Temporary Accommodation & PSL Officer will be involved implementing the Tenancies & Rents module and the remaining Housing Services staff will be involved in UAT.