

The Housing Corporation

The Housing Corporation is the national Government agency that funds new affordable housing and regulates housing associations in England. The Housing Corporation's National Affordable Housing Programme of £3.3bn for 2004/06 will fund over 67,000 affordable homes - 16,000 of them for key workers.

For many years, the Housing Corporation has maintained a census of accommodation throughout England. Subject to stringent regulatory processes, the Regulatory and Statistical Return (RSR), requires housing associations to provide information on all vacancies, accommodation, average rents, etc. across the country.



“Our long term relationship with Forvus has been excellent. Over the years, the Housing Corporation and Forvus have worked together to try and reduce the burden of what is undoubtedly a chore. Forvus has become very popular with housing associations because of the levels of support and commitment that they provide. The help line is the voice of the Corporation for many housing association staff.”

Dr. David Cheesman.
Head of Business Intelligence.
The Housing Corporation.

Extremely high standards of accountability:

“The emphasis here is on the word ‘regulatory’,” explained Dr. David Cheesman, the Housing Corporation’s Head of Business Intelligence. “Our annual surveys are very tightly controlled and, because we are a regulating body, we have extremely high standards of accountability.”

Information from these surveys is of crucial value to the Housing Corporation in regulating a sector which is responsible for some 2 million households and which has invested hundreds of million of pounds of tax payers money. *“We are safeguarding the interests of the tenants and the tax payer,” continued Dr. Cheesman. “Normal statistical surveys can accept a certain degree of error, but since this data is being used to support risk-based regulation by the Housing Corporation, we cannot afford to make mistakes.”*

In addition to providing the key information necessary on which to base such investment decisions, the information gained from the RSR is also used to identify regulatory defined risks (such as abnormal vacancy rates, over-ambitious expansion, unaffordable rents, or failure to take projected demands into account), and obtain additional data so that corrective procedures can be recommended and put into place.

Migrating to an electronic solution

Until a few years ago, the RSR procedure was heavily paper-based. Housing associations completed forms and returned these to the Housing Corporation, with data being input manually into the back office system. In addition to being both time consuming and prone to errors, the Housing Corporation recognised that the RSRs were regarded as a chore by housing associations and wanted to make the procedure as painless as possible.

“Although the process was still primarily paper-based, we were starting to migrate to an electronic solution,” explained Dr. Cheesman. “We believed that we simply didn’t have the expertise or the time to develop and test an



electronic survey system in house, and quickly concluded that it would be far more cost-effective and efficient to place this project with the experts and so we issued an invitation to tender.”

The first 5 year tender was won by Forvus, which, working in close cooperation with the Housing Corporation, developed an electronic version of the RSR. At the expiration of the initial tender, the Housing Corporation issued a second five year tender in 2003, which was again won by Forvus.

Dedicated help desk was the clincher

“During both tender processes we identified a handful of companies that had the necessary technical expertise to develop and maintain the electronic RSRs,” commented Dr. Cheesman. *“The clincher for Forvus in both tenders was their willingness to provide a dedicated help desk which would assist housing associations with the RSR definitions, clear up misunderstands and ensure consistency.”*

The voice of the Housing Corporation

For many housing association staff, the helpline has become the voice of the Housing Corporation and has contributed to the rapid take-up of the electronic RSR process. Originally, the Housing Corporation expected that the process of making electronic returns mandatory for the larger associations would take two or three years, but, explained Dr. Cheesman, they were able to implement the mandatory requirement within a year. *“The electronic system was so successful and many housing associations requested to use it,”* he commented. *“The solution has delivered considerable savings in time and money - something that has been welcomed by housing associations of all sizes”.*

Popular workshops and seminars

Each annual RSR differs as additional required information is identified. Every year, Forvus builds a system to reflect the requirements and validations as specified by the Housing Corporation. Once letters have been sent by the Housing Corporation to each housing association, Forvus liaises with them to obtain and deliver the required data.

“It is extremely important that the systems developed by Forvus can be used by people at all levels within the housing associations,” explained Dr. Cheesman. *“Each year, Forvus runs workshops and conferences that give housing associations a better understanding of the forthcoming survey and validation processes so that we can hit our mandatory targets of 100% returns from the top 600 housing associations and minimize the numbers of unacceptable returns. The seminars and conferences are also widely popular with housing associations of all sizes as they are able to provide feedback on the previous year’s program and suggest enhancements that would assist them in completion of the surveys.”*

Since the partnership began, the Housing Corporation and Forvus have worked together on a number of website initiatives to aid the housing associations, including a secure website that allows them to download the survey form directly, access a databank of frequently asked questions and participate in Forum discussions with other housing associations.

The electronic solution has benefited both the Housing Corporation and housing associations and the Housing Corporation now has access to extremely accurate and timely information inline with regulatory requirements.

Benefits include:

- ◆ **Reduction in the burden of completing annual RSRs.**
- ◆ **User-friendly RSRs that can be used by housing associations of all sizes and computing resources.**
- ◆ **In-built cross-referencing and automatic calculations reduce the time required to complete the RSR, whilst reducing error rates.**
- ◆ **Telephone help-desk with ‘account managers’ that provide fast and accurate advice to housing associations, and maintain continuity and rapport.**
- ◆ **Workshops and seminars that prepare housing associations for forthcoming RSRs, boost user confidence in the service and encourage active participation in the future development of the electronic RSR.**

For more information on Forvus, visit our website: www.forvus.co.uk