

CASE STUDY

Southern Housing Group (SHG)

A leading UK housing association needed to improve its technology, so it could continue to provide housing that improved the lives of residents. Cato's SASE solution helped both meet their current requirements and support their future business objectives.

Overview

As one of the UK's largest housing associations, Southern Housing Group provides more than 30,000 homes for more than 77,000 people in London and the south of England through shared ownership, affordable rent, private market rent, and traditional social housing.

But, as Covid-19 has reminded us all, our homes are much more than bricks and mortar. They're a refuge, giving us a sense of belonging and community – and nowadays, a place to work. So, for the social housing sector, the pandemic not only affected practical activities such as moving people into homes or completing repairs, but it also posed unprecedented challenges around employment, loneliness and isolation.



Looking beyond the technology, I also enjoy working with the Wavenet team, as do my colleagues – this combination of the right solution, the right service and the right people is what makes a real partnership.”

Dave King

Southern Housing Group's Director of IT

In response to this, Southern Housing Group prioritised residents' health and safety, including mental wellbeing. For example, the Group focused on servicing 100 per cent of boilers and conducting emergency repairs within 24 hours while ensuring outdoor spaces were clean and well maintained so residents could enjoy a change of scenery.

At the same time, the Group itself had to adapt to new home and remote working practices for its employees, adopting significant technology changes to do so. But it also had to proceed with more long-standing technology transformation, which is how the relationship with Wavenet began.

Situation

With its ongoing work towards better systems integration for staff, improved online services for residents, and enhanced cyber security for the benefit of everybody, the Group knew that upgrading its network would be the catalyst for these goals. So, by August 2020, following the CCS tendering process, the Group had shortlisted Wavenet and invited us to present our proposed plan of action. At the top of the agenda was network security.

“Before we presented, we’d realised Southern Housing Group had a well-defined digital transformation strategy. It was obvious the IT team, led by the Group’s Director of IT, Dave King, ‘had done their homework’ – they clearly articulated what they were looking for from their new technology and their new partner.”

At the heart of Wavenet’s proposal was a Cato Secure Access Service Edge platform – or SASE, pronounced ‘sassy’. It combines WAN with comprehensive cloud-based network security and, by doing so, meets the dynamic security needs of organisations where reliable connectivity is as critical as electricity.

“Key to our proposal is that the Cato platform provides layered security architecture, protecting the entire organisation and its traffic at multiple levels.”

“And what’s especially valuable is it does this from the cloud, securing the entire estate. So, for Southern Housing Group, that means more secure and reliable connectivity for its corporate offices, its community centres, its wireless and mobile users, and so on.”

The Cato platform also confers other valuable benefits, summarised as the ‘ability to grow and grow with your organisation’. So not only does it significantly improve security, but it also provides more resilient, consistent, and flexible connectivity. Additionally, it’s highly transparent, meaning traffic is monitored in real-time – both the client and supplier share the same dashboards so issues can be addressed as they happen, with everything recorded for future reviews. By contrast, not all platforms or providers offer this – and without such visibility, clients with network difficulties are often at the whim of their suppliers.

Finally – in contrast to MPLS technology – SASE is more cost-effective, which for not-for-profit organisations like Southern Housing Group is particularly important.

With this proposal exceeding Southern Housing Group’s original expectations with those pleasant surprises, it selected Wavenet as its new partner, signalling the start of the project.

Solution

By autumn 2020, Southern Housing Group and Wavenet were getting stuck into the project’s first phase. But with Covid cases rising and the possibility of another lockdown ahead, the work needed to be more carefully planned than usual.

“Although technology seems to be a more remote and wireless affair than ever, there’s still a lot of hands-on work involved in providing network services.”

“With this project, we had to audit the Group’s physical infrastructure through site surveys – and we had to do that with the limitations of social distancing. But while there were a few access issues due to lockdown, the work ran overwhelmingly smoothly, with the Group’s staff being very welcoming and helpful as our engineers visited all of its 118 sites.”

These assessments pathed the way for the next phase of work – system design. But before it did, both Wavenet and the Group made another pleasant discovery, underlining the value of building a trusting professional partnership from day one.



That said, the presentation certainly wasn’t about merely ticking boxes. In fact, it stood out because there was a real eureka moment for the Group when we discussed what our proposed solution could do as standard – because, until that point, the Group had considered those features desirable ‘nice-to-haves’.”

Dave King

Southern Housing Group’s Director of IT

“While an IT engineer visit is part and parcel of office life and easy to take for granted, it can help your staff see their IT concerns – issues they may have raised previously – are being taken seriously. It sends a clear message that they can look forward to better connectivity and tools for their work, even boosting their morale. With this project, it played out for us that way, too, because as we made our visits, we got lots of positive feedback.”

With site surveys complete, it was time for more planning and designing – but relaying the phase one findings to Southern Housing Group also proved valuable, further developing the partnership.

“Often with projects of this nature, we find it’s been a long time since there’s been an audit of the organisation’s IT, if at all, so it can be an eye-opening process.”

“In the case of Southern Housing Group, we identified and explained the immediate remedial work required. But good partnerships are not built on overengineering projects or overselling products, so we also highlighted what wasn’t needed. This helped the Group use its budgets more wisely.”

Next came the pre-staging and site installation phases – including ordering equipment and building it, testing, and further surveys – all preparing for the big day of the switchover and the move towards business as usual. At this point, the Group had understandable concerns that switching from one provider to another would involve a loss of connectivity, but in the event, the transition was seamless, with no such loss happening at all.

“Major projects like this are not just about working with the client as your partner – it’s about knowing how to work with the incumbent supplier, too. As we’re taking over another supplier’s work, there’s the potential for professional rivalry. But because we’ve completed many of these projects for large organisations, we’ve built up a lot of people skills to be able to get the best out of our predecessors, so the switch is as straightforward as possible.”

With that switch made, it was time for Wavenet’s managed services team to step forward with a comprehensive onboarding process. This involved going through, in detail, financial, contractual inclusions and exclusions; technical manuals; contact details; incident reporting processes; asset registers; and much more.

“These projects are not just about providing new a system, but also sharing new knowledge.”. “This was a

huge part of this project – it started from day one, right up to the transition to business as usual, and beyond. For example, those early site surveys gave us a more technical understanding of the client’s IT, but also gave the Group greater visibility of its own IT estate, with is helpful for future IT projects and our continued partnership.”

Today, as a managed service provider, Wavenet continues to support the Group with its now not-so-new Cato platform, which in total took about seven months to set up. Through that partnership, there are 25 key service areas, as listed below, managed by a dedicated Wavenet team.

And what about Southern Housing Group’s experience of working with Wavenet? One answer to this question is the Group’s own internal survey, which reviewed staff’s experience of the project and their perception of working with Wavenet. The results? Resoundingly positive.

The Group’s Director of IT Dave King adds: “We’ve been providing homes to people and helping to build communities since 1901, and to continue that work in 2022, we need technology that’s secure, reliable and flexible, to help our staff do their jobs, and our organisation to help our residents.

“From the outset, it was clear the Wavenet team understood this, drawing on their impressive history of working with large public and third sector organisations. They not only developed a plan that did far more than meet all our requirements, but they also ensured that plan was sensitive to our budgets, completed with minimum disruption, and delivered new technology that could grow with us as an organisation.”

“Looking beyond the technology, I also enjoy working with the Wavenet team, as do my colleagues – this combination of the right solution, the right service and the right people is what makes a real partnership.”

You can find out more about the Southern Housing Group here.

www.shgroup.org.uk



Let's talk **0333 234 0011**