ICT and channel shift – how new ways of working are saving RPs money and helping them deliver a better service to customers
– Colin Sales, Managing Director, 3C

It has been widely publicised that smartphones are now outselling toothbrushes and that for a large proportion of the population, they have made the use of alarm clocks and cameras obsolete. Attitudes to service have also changed. When I present to audiences on the subject of digital business transformation, I ask attendees if they prefer to book a restaurant table online or over the phone. Over 90% have always had a preference for online.

This move to digital communication provides considerable opportunity for both saving cost and for the provision of improved services, available 24x7 from anywhere that has an internet connection. Combine this with the Government's demand to move services online and the business case for shifting communication channels becomes both compelling and indeed inevitable. Associated savings will generally counter the seismic reductions in funding introduced last summer, a point no doubt taken into consideration when funding levels were reviewed. Both PWC and SOCITM have independently reported that moving customer communication online should lead to associated cost reductions of over 90%, and such savings are just the beginning. Landlords that are channel shifting services are also benefiting from increased revenue from sales and letting activities; reduced void times and better customer interaction. There are also the environmental benefits from the reduced need for journeys and from going 'paper-free' (e.g. the electronic circulation of newsletters).

There will always be a need for there to be somebody a customer can talk to, as indeed there will be for a toothbrush, however, whichever way you look at it, doing business over the Internet is here to stay. Ensuring your customers have online access to your services has to be a priority.

To achieve digital business transformation, there are some important first steps. These are, in order of priority:

1. Reduce avoidable contact - Re-engineer processes so that the majority of issues can be resolved on the first contact. Providing easy access to the information needed to achieve this is key and an essential part of moving services online.

2. Promote existing digital options - If you have good existing digital services, you must promote them. Do not expect customers to simply find and use them.

3. Prioritise the services to take digital - Where can the greatest savings be made by taking processes online? Focus tends to be on those where there is a high volume of transactions (for example responsive repairs), potential for financial losses (for example service charges and voids) or where there are known service delivery failures. A Manchester based landlord saved over £350,000 p.a. by changing the way they managed responsive repairs and void management. Many quick wins can also be achieved, so delivering immediate savings.

4. Transform the business to be digital by default - Customers need to want to communicate 'digitally by choice'. Ensure online services look appealing and are easy to use. Also ensure that re-engineered processes are truly digital and do not require manual intervention, otherwise they will prove less efficient and less convenient for customers to use.

Some RP's are yet to start their journey to digitally transform, but others are completing theirs. A number of golden rules have become evident:

- Both changes in operation and culture are required and hence initiatives need to be driven from the top, ideally championed by the CEO. Support must be provided to ensure objectives are achieved in the long term, identifying teething problems and introducing further innovation where appropriate.

- Review how success has been achieved by others, don't try and 'recreate the wheel'.

- Incentives, often financial, are commonly offered to encourage customers to sign up to the use of digital services.

- The introduction of digital services is often accompanied by the provision of customer assistance and training, 'Assisted Digital', ensuring appropriate help is given to any tenant unable to use their digital account. This would for example include help with a UC application. Importantly, such initiatives can often attract grant funding.

It would be irresponsible of me to claim that by following some simple rules, the move to online services will be relatively simple, but having had to achieve such a move almost a decade ago in order to safeguard my old business (delivering managed IT support services), I can reassure you that the implementation process is formulaic and readily achievable.

So to conclude, if to justify the investment in time and money necessary to move services online you are still deciding what could be achieved, here is a summary of some of the many benefits:

- Improved customer service, available 24/7

- Significant reduction in communication costs

- Liberation of office space, allowing staff more flexible working

- More effective delivery of services off-site and in the customer's home

- Significant reduction in the operational cost of providing repairs

- Reduction in paper and postage costs

- Improved, real-time business intelligence

- Increased customer engagement and participation

- The ability to reach and attract a wider range of customers

- Reduce void times

- Manage online the entire end-to-end sales/application process

- Automate the lettings process and increase private rentals

- Demonstrate improved security and create a full audit trail

- Improve the ability to collect service charges and to sell additional services