MANAGED AND RECOVERY SERVICES

Southern Housing Group finds cloud recovery solution as safe as houses

Southern Housing Group is one of southern England's largest housing associations, owning and managing 26,000 homes for more than 66,000 residents. Founded in 1901 to provide housing for the poor, today it employs nearly 900 people and works with over 70 local authorities.

The Group is heavily reliant on several critical IT systems and Rob Wood, its Head of IT Operations, recognised it was vulnerable to disruption without adequate disaster recovery provision in place. He evaluated the options – investing to add capacity to the Group's existing London office or outsourcing to a third party specialist – and found the answer was clear.

Southern Housing Group already subscribed to Sungard Availability Services Workplace Recovery centres to provide alternative workspace for key workers at its London and Horsham offices where its all-important call centre is based. However, the recovery plans in place for the vital IT systems at the heart of its operation were limited. These include Orchard Housing, a database application that records tenancies and processes tenants' property maintenance requests, and Open Accounts, which handles incoming and outgoing payments.

As an existing Workplace Recovery customer, Sungard AS was the logical place for Robert Wood to start when looking for an IT partner. Its Recover2Cloud^{SM} for Server Replication service, designed for business-critical applications, would enable the Group to meet its Recovery Time Objective (RTO) of 4 hours and 15 minute Recovery Point Objective (RPO).

With this service, data is replicated from selected production servers to a secure cloud infrastructure in a highly resilient Sungard AS cloud disaster recovery centre. All aspects of replication, failover and recovery are monitored and managed by Sungard AS and the service is backed by a cast iron Service Level Agreement. Giving customers added peace of mind, the Continuous Data Protection feature enables recovery to a point in time within three days of an interruption, which can prove useful in the event of data corruption on the source server.

As Robert Wood found, the cost-effective service is typically 50% less expensive than a physical server replication solution. Following a successful Proof of Concept demonstration, the Group signed up to the service. However, Robert confesses to initially feeling apprehensive about the move to a virtualised environment. "The Sungard team was very relaxed about the implementation but I was more cautious so we installed the replication agents on servers over the weekend – I didn't want any problems to disrupt the business," he admits. "But everything ran like clockwork, which was very impressive. It built my faith in those technical guys and showed me their confidence wasn't misplaced."

Business challenge
Southern Housing Group recognised that it needed to put in place more robust disaster recovery arrangements to enable the organisation to withstand disruption and continue providing vital services to its 66,000 residents. It faced the dilemma whether to build an in-house data centre or choose an outsourced solution.

Solution
- Recover2Cloud^{SM} for Server Replication.

"We avoided the capital expenditure of approximately £¼ million for the design and build of an in-house DR solution by opting for Sungard's Recover2Cloud service."

Robert Wood,
Head of IT Operations,
Southern Housing Group

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"The implementation ran very smoothly; nothing was too much trouble for the Sungard team even when it involved working unsociable hours (evenings and weekends)."

Robert Wood,
Head of IT Operations,
Southern Housing Group

As for the relationship that's developing with Sungard AS, he says, "Everyone I've dealt with – from the technical guys to the project management team and my account manager who steered everything through – has been very accommodating. Nothing has been too much trouble even when it involved working at unsociable hours over weekends."

Robert Wood predicts the Group, in the long-term, may move to an Infrastructure as a Service solution and sees Recover2Cloud℠ as a good way of "dipping their toes in the water." He has not yet needed to invoke the service but comments, "I find it reassuring knowing it's there if we need it. An added plus is that we can use it on a granular basis for selected systems – it's not an 'all or nothing' solution."

Business benefits
- High availability of applications and services with maximum recovery time (RTO) of 4 hours
- Saving of £¼m capital investment, with comparable annual running costs to in-house solution
- Peace of mind critical systems and data will always be available
- Preserves organisation's reputation for efficiency and customer care
- Prevents financial loss due to lost or late rent payments
- Successful proof of concept demonstration made the transition low risk.

About Sungard Availability Services

Sungard Availability Services provides managed IT services, information availability consulting services, business continuity management software, and disaster recovery services. To learn more, visit www.sungardas.co.uk or call 0800 143 413

EMEA Head Office:
Unit B Heathrow Corporate Park, Green Lane, Hounslow, Middlesex TW4 6ER
+44 (0)800 143 413

Belgium
+32 (0)2 513 3618 www.sungardas.be

France
+33 (0)1 64 80 61 61 www.sungardas.fr

India
(+91) 20 673 10 400 www.sungardas.in

Ireland
+353 (0)1 467 3650 www.sungardas.ie

Luxembourg
+352 357305-1 www.sungardas.lu

Sweden
+46 (0) 8 666 32 00 www.sungardas.se

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