

TESTIMONIALS

Is Text Messaging For Social Housing

As of Q1 2017, Ofcom reported that 94% of adults in the UK now own or use a mobile phone. Text messaging presents social housing with a powerful tool to improve the quality of communications with tenants.

In this short article, we will explore the implications involved with adopting intelligent text messaging for social housing.

Different levels of Text Messaging services

The first thing to be aware of is that there are many SMS solutions available on the market and they come with varying levels of integration service. Through implementing many text messaging solutions for the social housing sector, we've found that the following features are most relevant for registered providers:



Digital Communications Manager HUB

This will form the core of your text messaging solution. The Digital Communications Manager will include all the core features of your SMS service, enabling you to:

- manage your database of tenant, client and supplier contacts; i.e. the participants
- save pre-prepared standard text messages
- schedule text messages to be sent to a particular group of contacts in bulk
- write and send ad-hoc text messages to a particular group of contacts in bulk

Two-way Communications

With two-way communications, you'll be able to send and receive text messages, enabling tenants to communicate with your organisation in an automated and intelligent manner. This will enable you to provide a wide variety of automated 24/7 text messaging services through the use of workflows designed specifically to your requirements. Not only will this enhance the way your organisation communicates, the automation aspect will save time for staff and enable them to further drive business objectives.

Automated SMS Workflow Designer:

In our experience, every social landlord is different. Whilst the core principles of social housing are similar, the execution varies from organisation to organisation. With a workflow designer, you'll be able to provide a wide variety of automated services developed specifically for your requirements. Some examples of popular text messaging services include:

- Tenant Rent Balance Enquiry
- Request Rent Payment Bank Details
- Tenant Quality Satisfaction Surveys
- Report a repair
- Tenant communication request with their housing officer

Audit Trail:

An audit trail that cannot be modified by users will provide your organisation with proof that messages were sent and received by the recipient. This enables you to incorporate text messaging as part of your arrears policy and submit the log as recognised evidence in a court of law.

Integration With Your Housing Management System:

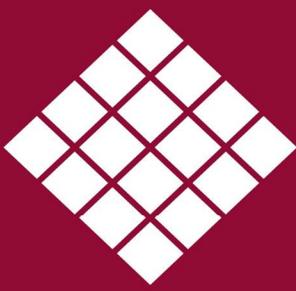
Your housing management system will already contain all the tenant, client and supplier contact information who you work with. By integrating your text messaging services and housing management system, the data can be maintained in one location; ensuring consistency and eliminating the need to duplicate input.

Integration also provides opportunities for further enhanced services. For example, featured services may include:

- Allowing tenants to reschedule appointments
- Allowing suppliers to update, cancel or complete a repair order
- Automatic arrears notification when tenant reaches designated stages
- Automatic Housing Benefit entitlement change notification
- Regular updates about rent changes
- Text Messaging

OmniLedger Limited
1 Alders Court
Watchmead
Welwyn Garden City
Hertfordshire
AL7 1LT
Tel: 01707 324201
Fax: 01707 375572
sales@omniledger.co.uk

www.omniledger.co.uk



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Reducing annual overheads

Adopting a two-way intelligent text messaging service with a variety of automated features presents social landlords with a platform to reduce overheads through efficiency savings. This is achieved by replacing traditional media with a cheaper text alternative. Below we touch on a couple of simple checks you can perform to help determine if text messaging will accomplish these savings for your organisation.



Monetary Savings:

After having conducted research with the National Housing Federation, Deeplaye found that sending a letter can cost between £2 and £25. This takes into consideration all elements of sending a letter, including the following of varying qualities:

- Stamps
- Envelopes
- Paper
- Labels
- Ink
- Labour

Comparatively, the cost of sending a text message is as low as 8p per text. With this we can see that a text message is much more cost effective than sending a letter.

To find out if your organisation will benefit from monetary savings, take the elements listed above and calculate how much your organisation spends per letter. You will then be able to total the number of letters your organisation sends out per annum, and estimate the potential savings made through text replacement.

Of course, not all letters within your organisation may be replaceable with a text alternative and these should be excluded when estimating the ROI. Some common examples of overhead reduction include:

- Replacing waiting list acceptance letters
- Replacing repair quality satisfaction surveys
- Replacing arrears letters
- Replacing rent statements with periodic balance notifications
- Replacing payment receipts

Time Savings:

With two-way texting communications, social landlords are able to host 24/7 self-services for tenants and suppliers. These types of texting services are fully managed and require no intervention from a member staff. By hosting a selection of self-services, providers are able to reduce the load on staff and spend those time savings driving business objectives.

Time savings are more difficult to determine early on as they will be decided by tenant uptake and how many of your services can be converted into a text alternative.

- Uptake can be improved through implementing a number of best practices when rolling out your SMS solution, as explained later on in this article.
- Conversion can be determined by listing which services you can realistically substitute with an automated text alternative.

If you're having difficulty determining what services you can convert into a text message, your chosen SMS supplier will normally have a project manager on hand who will be able to provide guidance. Some common service examples of time-savings include:

- Automating incoming Rent Balance enquiries
- Automating incoming Direct Debit information enquiries
- Automating appointment confirmations prior to visit
- Automating supplier repair status and job completion

Improving KPI's For Social Housing

"The State of SMS" published by textlocal revealed a couple of interesting statistics regarding SMS within the UK:

- 90% of text messages will be read within 3 minutes
- 98% of text messages will likely be read by the end of the day

Comparatively, a letter would take 1 to 3 days to deliver depending on the postage used and may not be opened by the recipient.



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By taking advantage of the high readability rate associated with text messages, social landlords are able to improve key performance areas that are intricately linked with tenant communication, such as:

- Rent arrears %
- Repair Appointments Kept %
- Average Relet Days
- Repair Satisfaction

In one such example, Shian Housing Association saw a significant reduction in outstanding rent arrears since utilising Pyramid Messenger, coupled with a large increase in positive responses to arrears management communication. Their tenants' improved response rate allowed housing officers to put plans in place to tackle arrears cases, whereas previously there had been no response to letter correspondence until a much later stage of their arrears policy.

Tenant Benefits

Whilst the registered social landlord is able to benefit from savings and improved KPI's, your tenants are also able to take advantage of intelligent SMS; enhancing the way they engage with you. Depending on how your organisation adopts intelligent text services and what best practices are put in place:

- Tenants can benefit from self-services that are also available out of hours
- You can promote tenant engagement with community events, as well as yourself as an organisation
- You can promote digital inclusion for your tenants
- Help your tenants manage their finances through the use of reminders



Best practices and things to be aware of:

Ultimately, when investing in an intelligent text messaging service you'll want a fast ROI and the highest level of uptake possible by your tenants. From experience, OmniLedger would normally provide the following advice and best practices recommendations:

- Before considering an SMS solution at all, at least 60% of the tenants you service should have a mobile number recorded against their file. Otherwise, the scope of success will be reduced. If you have less than this percentage then you'll want to perform a data gathering exercise with your tenants first.
- Include SMS within your tenancy agreement to your tenants and encourage them to consent to you holding their mobile number on file. Of course, the option to opt out should also be given.
- Include a welcoming package on launch to notify your tenants.
- Advertise texting services on your website and/or leaflets. Here's an example of one of our customers texting service page: <https://dwpousing.co.uk/services/texting-service/>
- Include an automated text service to allow tenants to update their number or subscribe to the service.
- Keep your text messages relevant to your tenants to maintain positive engagement. Not doing so can turn your audience away.
- Plan and control your text message usage to ensure you remain on budget.
- Timing is important, "The State Of SMS" found that 12:00 to 15:00 is the most effective time to send a text message. This will vary depending on the type of message, so it is important to monitor response rates and find out when your tenants are most receptive to texts.

Summary:

Text messaging is still on the rise and has emerged as one of the most reliable methods of communications. By adopting text message services social landlords are able to promote digital inclusion, reduce overheads and improve KPI's.

However, success is dependent on the adoption of best practices to promote engagement with your tenants, keeping the content relevant for them and nurturing your audience.

OmniLedger Limited
1 Alders Court
Watchmead
Welwyn Garden City
Hertfordshire
AL7 1LT
Tel: 01707 324201
Fax: 01707 375572
sales@omniledger.co.uk

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