

Decision process for BC CHARMS

Decision #1: Buy off the shelf or build from scratch?

Our first decision was to discern the best approach for BC CHARMS. Our research and advice led us to consider the following options:

Consider building:	Consider buying:
• Software development and maintenance are part of our core business and organizational competencies • Potentially licensing the software to other organizations in the future as a potential revenue source is of interest to us • The needs we are trying to address via the software are highly unique and not comparable to those in other organizations/jurisdictions • A high degree of control over the design of the system is important to us • No software products already exist that meet our needs • We have adequate time to build a new software application from scratch and a high tolerance for potential schedule delays during the development lifecycle • We have adequate funding to build a new software application from scratch and a high tolerance for potential cost increases during the development lifecycle • We have adequate technical human resources with a guaranteed long-term commitment to the product and organization • We do not wish to outsource some risk to a software vendor	• Software development and maintenance are not part of our core business and organizational competencies • Potentially licensing the software to other organizations in the future as a potential revenue source is not of interest to us • The needs we are trying to address via the software are comparable to those in other organizations/jurisdictions and have already been adequately addressed by existing software products • One or more software products already exist that meet our needs and are within our budget • A high degree of control over the design of the system is not important to us, as long as it reasonably meets our requirements • We have time constraints and/or lower tolerance for potential schedule delays during the development lifecycle • We have funding constraints and/or lower tolerance for potential cost increases during the development lifecycle • We do not have adequate technical human resources with a guaranteed long-term commitment to the product and organization • We wish to outsource some risk to a software vendor

Decision made: As we reviewed the issues, as well as the costs – and feedback from agencies who had built software, we decided the way forward was to purchase and customize an existing product. The decision was also made with the awareness that even if we built our own system, there would still be costs around maintenance, hosting, sustainability and more that would take us beyond the scope of the initial project funding.

Decision #2: Which products are off the shelf, customizable and possible candidates?

The decision was to find out what products were available to us and how they might work. We wanted to create a shortlist to do a deeper dive into the most suitable candidate.

We reviewed in greater detail the following systems:

- HIFIS: Homeless Individuals & Families Information System
- iCAROL
- iCARE
- OCMS
- Efforts to Outcomes*
- NewTrack
- Salesforce
- Apricot 360
- BC Housing Connections
- BC Housing Registry

We conducted meetings, reviews and asked users for their experience of each system, while in parallel creating a systems and software requirements document. Each part of the process – both the review and the documentation – guided our thinking. We also learned system limitations and limitations around licensing.

Decision made: The three systems we selected to put on a short list and take further in the process were: HIFIS, Apricot 360 and BC Housing Registry/Connections. We continued to keep the option open of building a system should none of these products work for us, however given the budget and timing restraints, we did not pursue this in detail.

Decision #3: Examining shortlisted candidates

The next steps we took, while compiling the systems and software documents were to get demonstrations of each system to understand their depth and scope, as well as to ascertain some key fundamentals, such as all data being stored in Canada, ability for multiple agencies to access the system, ongoing support and system maintenance, and sustainability beyond the ring-fenced funding for the project.

The results of the fuller examination of the systems were as follows:

1. **HIFIS.** This federally owned system only makes licences available to Designated Community Entities (funded by Service Canada) through its Reaching Home program, except in BC. In BC, there is only one instance that has been licensed and that is with BC Housing. BC Housing is unable to issue a sub-license for BC CHARMS and HIFIS will not issue a separate licence to BC CHARMS.
2. **Apricot 360.** This is a software as a service (SaaS) product that is designed for non-profits. It can be customized to suit the requirements of BC CHARMS and has a housing/beds module that will be released to augment the current system. The forms, workflows and reporting can all be customized, and all data is housed in Canada. It is a per-user subscription model that also offers full training, product support and maintenance packages.
3. **BC Housing Registry/Connection.** This system can't track referrals from beginning to end. It works well for one referral but not for a continuous care model like BC CHARMS tracking people from arrival through to market housing. Additionally, the Housing Connections database only contains supportive housing that is funded by BC Housing, so not anyone can join. The HC Database is used to connect and interface with the BC Housing Registry, which is focused on long-term housing and tenants, not for people moving through a system. While there is some synergy between the Housing Connections database and our own, the differences are substantial and there are no instances of any sub-licensing or difference instances being customized. Finally, and crucially, it's nearly 16 years old and due to be replaced at any time now, so is not a long-term solution in any case. The software has come to the end of its useful life.

* It should be noted that although **Efforts to Outcomes (ETO)** is part of the Apricot 360 family and is currently used by one or two shelter providers in BC, it was not shortlisted. This is due to the fact that it is a much larger enterprise-level comprehensive outcomes and case management tool for large non-profits, government agencies, and community collaboratives. It is built to handle multiple partners, high volumes of programs, advanced security protocols, and multifaceted reporting and analytics initiatives – and would be “over-specified” for the needs of the BC CHARMS system.

Decision made: Due to the inability to license a unique instance of HIFIS and the fact that BC Housing Registry/Connections database is outdated software that BC Housing is unable to create a separate instance of, we decided to move forward with Apricot 360 as our only option for an off-the-shelf customizable product.

Decision #4: Sustainability and licensing

Now that we have our final candidate for an off-the-shelf product, we have looked at the thorny issue of licensing and project sustainability. The project is funded for two years, but naturally we need the system to go beyond the project limits. Apricot 360 will issue user licenses for five years, and training / support packages accordingly which will mean full support for the product moving forward, continued product improvement and will bear the costs/risks for the software. The project funding is ring-fenced for two years, but we know of several projects which could impact the system moving forward (for example, the introduction of a BC Refugee Claimant Reception Centre), and we believe that sustaining the project for five years is a realistic and sensible approach and will allow further time for developing a sustainability plan.

If BC CHARMS built its own software and database system, we foresee the issues outlined in decision #1, which is why we do not propose this approach. It is a much higher risk strategy with the very real possibility of cost overruns and delayed implementation.

Decision made: We believe that creating our own system from scratch is the wrong approach. Using a five-year subscription model is the best way to ensure we deliver a system that is reliable, cost effective, supported, user-friendly, and would deliver the best value for money.

Decision #5: Budget

In development with Apricot 360, we have created the following budget for the project.

	Subscription	Training	Support	Total	Implementation, Training, ASC hours
Year 1	\$49,391	\$1,255	\$3,763	\$54,409	\$19,109
Year 2	\$50,873	\$1,293	\$3,876	\$56,041	
				2 Year Total	\$129,559
Year 3	\$52,399	\$1,331	\$3,992	\$57,723	
Year 4	\$53,971	\$1,371	\$4,112	\$59,454	
Year 5	\$55,590	\$1,413	\$4,235	\$61,238	
				5 year total	\$307,974

	Subscription	Training	Support	Total	Implementation, Training, ASC hours
Year 1	\$60,367	\$1,568	\$3,763	\$65,698	\$19,109
Year 2	\$62,178	\$1,615	\$3,876	\$67,669	
				2 year total	\$152,476

Option 1 – Five year contract with 2 year “get out” clause. Option 2 – Fixed two year contract

Decision made: Using Option 1, this project proposal fits within the overall funding from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and will deliver a professional and useful system – which will maximize its impact on helping refugee claimants find housing from their time of arrival to full market housing.

Recommendation:

Based on the decisions outlined above, we recommend moving forward with Apricot 360 as the BC CHARMS housing referral system, by signing a five year contract (with a two-year get out clause) to lock in best pricing.

Outline timeline:

Should the Ministry of Municipal Affairs approve the recommendation to adopt Apricot 360 as the vendor for the BC CHARMS system, we would anticipate a timeline to full implementation as follows:

April 2021	Contract drafted, agreed and accepted
May 2021 – July 2021	Build out, customization and implementation Communication and launch plans drafted and approved Preparation of launch materials Preparation of training plan and documentation Pre-launch communication plans initiated Pilot users chosen
August 2021 – October 2021	A/B Testing phase underway with pilot users Implement any necessary changes
October 2021	Implement pre-launch communication plan
November 2021	Begin pre-launch training Sign up users and issue licenses
January 2022	Full launch of system Continue communications and training new users Request user feedback and amend system if necessary
February 2022	Conduct first month review and collate additional feedback Run first month reports and create additional reports if necessary
March 2022	Three-month review Communication plan continues