



# Security Everywhere – The SASE Playbook.

Everything you need to know  
as you define your SASE Strategy.



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# 1 Paving the Way for Digital Transformation in Social Housing

A new era of tenant services is being defined by the pervasive influence of digital inclusion. By harnessing the power of technology, housing services are enhanced, compliance is achieved and the growing expectations of residents are properly addressed.

Digital transformation, as it applies to social housing, represents a comprehensive shift in how providers operate and interact with tenants. It fundamentally alters the way housing associations work, placing tenants at the heart of service delivery, enabling them to interact with providers in real-time, using platforms and applications that are integral parts of their everyday lives. The goal is not merely to replace analogue processes with digital ones but to improve services, streamline workflows and encourage a culture of transparency and respect.



In the context of social housing, digital inclusion empowers tenants, offering them new ways to engage with providers, access services, and make their voices heard.

The transformation is also shaped by a changing landscape of expectations and standards. Both regulators and residents now demand more from housing providers. This necessitates the adoption of technology to maintain compliance, efficiency, and tenant satisfaction. Regulations such as the [Social Housing White Paper](#) and the [Fire Safety Act 2021](#) call for greater transparency, faster response times, and robust safety measures, all of which are facilitated by digital transformation.

The first step is understanding the potential of [Secure Access Service Edge \(SASE\)](#) as a framework for technology transformation. As SASE can provide a secure, efficient foundation for digital services in social housing, enhancing tenant engagement, ensuring data privacy, and enabling a swift response to any situation.

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## 2 SASE: Redefining Security and Networking in Social Housing

As the social housing landscape evolves, adopting new and innovative solutions is not just beneficial but crucial. This is why SASE is of such great importance. Positioned at the forefront of modern network architecture, SASE offers compelling benefits for housing associations seeking to and improve their service delivery.

But what exactly is SASE? SASE is a network architecture model that combines wide area networking (WAN) and network security services into a single cloud-based service model. Its cloud-native nature enables consistent security enforcement and network performance, regardless of user location. For housing associations, this means they can provide seamless online services to their tenants and securely manage personal data, leading to enhanced user experiences and increased confidence in digital services.

SASE holds the potential to elevate tenant services in several ways. It offers a powerful conduit for tenant voices, allowing their concerns and feedback to be heard and addressed swiftly. With features like secure web gateways, data loss prevention and advanced threat prevention, SASE ensures a secure environment for tenants to interact with online platforms, increasing trust and engagement.

Additionally, the adoption of SASE can aid housing associations in maintaining regulatory compliance. The shift towards digital service provision has been accompanied by new regulations that add to existing delivery pressures and administrative requirements. Compliance with these regulations requires robust data protection, efficient response mechanisms and transparent processes, all facilitated by a SASE architecture.

Unfortunately, not all housing associations are on the same page when it comes to digital adoption. Many lag behind due to legacy systems, lack of resources, or resistance to change. By offering simplified management, enhanced security and cost-effective scalability, SASE can help these associations overcome their barriers to digital transformation, ensuring that all tenants, regardless of their housing provider, can reap the benefits of digital services.

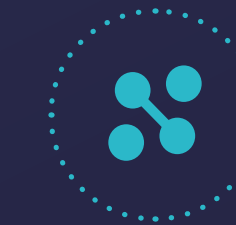
### What is SASE?

**Gartner** defines SASE as an architecture that delivers converged network and security as a service capabilities. SASE supports branch office, remote worker and on-premises secure access use cases. It is primarily delivered as a service and enables zero trust access based on the identity of the device or entity, combined with real-time context and security and compliance policies. It is predicted that by 2025, **80% of enterprises** will have adopted a strategy to unify web, cloud services and private application access using a SASE/SSE architecture.

### Challenges with traditional security strategies



Unseen vulnerabilities



Fragmented approach across hosted or SaaS applications



Security controls do not align with policy



Hardware is built to cater for peak loads, rather than scaling to match demand



Resource intensive configuration



Inconsistent security based on user location



Disjointed user experience

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## 3 Addressing Social Housing Challenges with SASE Capabilities

The social housing sector faces a range of challenges, from the necessity of effective tenant communication to the evolving demands of regulatory compliance, housing associations find themselves grappling with complex issues.

### Tenant Communication:

Effective communication with tenants is a cornerstone of excellent service provision. Traditional communication methods, however, are increasingly unable to meet the growing demands for immediacy, convenience and transparency. SASE enables housing associations to take an integrated, omnichannel approach, supporting an array of digital communication channels to make sure that tenants' concerns are addressed promptly. It also allows for a more consistent and personalised approach to communication, enhancing tenant satisfaction.

### Regulatory Compliance:

A quickly evolving regulatory environment has placed additional compliance burdens on housing associations. These require stringent data protection measures, swift responses to incidents and a commitment to continual improvement. SASE's combination of network security and performance in a single cloud-based service model helps associations comply with these regulations by providing end-to-end security and visibility and facilitating efficient incident response.

### Legacy Systems:

Legacy systems and outdated IT infrastructure are common stumbling blocks in the path to digital transformation. These systems often lack the flexibility to integrate with new digital services and can present security vulnerabilities. SASE, with its cloud-native nature, bypasses these challenges, offering housing associations a scalable flexible, and secure framework for digital transformation.

### Digital Inclusion:

A significant concern for housing associations is promoting digital inclusion for all tenants, especially those who may lack digital skills or face other barriers to accessing digital services. SASE supports this goal by providing secure and reliable access to online services, allowing housing associations to focus on enablement and support initiatives for their tenants.



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## 3.1 The Social Housing (Regulation) Bill: An Overview

The [Social Housing \(Regulation\) Bill](#) is a landmark legislation progressing through the UK Parliament, primarily aimed at enhancing the quality of social housing across England. This reform initiative was triggered in part by the tragic death of 2-year-old Awaab Ishak and aims to ensure that every tenant has access to safe, secure and decent living conditions.

The Bill is another step in enhancing tenant rights, bringing an urgent need for housing providers to be able to respond promptly and accurately to emerging issues.

As of June 2023, these amendments were approved by the Lords and the bill is anticipated to receive Royal Assent by the end of the current parliamentary session.

Key amendments to the bill include:



The institution of 'Awaab's Law', requiring social housing landlords to be held accountable in the case of unmet housing standards



Setting time limits for repairs



Establishing new regulatory standards for landlords to clarify complaint procedures for tenants



Strengthening the powers of the Housing Ombudsman Service



The introduction of qualification requirements for social housing managers.

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# 4 The Role of SASE in Effective Response and Recovery

The recent pandemic highlighted the stark contrasts in how well-equipped housing associations were to respond to unexpected circumstances swiftly and effectively. With the pressing need for remote operations and digital services, those with agile digital strategies were clearly advantaged.

### Identifying Challenges:

The first step towards effective crisis response and recovery is understanding potential obstacles. When pursuing the process of digital transformation, housing associations might encounter challenges associated with outdated systems, data privacy concerns and staff training. Implementing SASE requires a thoughtful consideration of these issues and the development of a strategic plan to address them head-on.

### Risk Mitigation Strategies:

The holistic approach of SASE inherently mitigates several risks associated with traditional network architectures. It consolidates networking and security services into a single cloud-based platform, reducing complexity and potential points of failure. However, risk mitigation goes beyond technical solutions. Emphasis should be placed on meticulous planning, thorough testing and gradual deployment. Equally crucial are clear communication strategies and comprehensive training programs, which help all stakeholders to understand the changes and utilise new technologies effectively.

### Addressing Traditional Infrastructure Limitations with SASE:

Traditional infrastructures struggle to keep pace with the rapidly evolving threat landscape. End-users often lack adequate cybersecurity training and organisational leaders face the continuous challenge of streamlining financial and operational resources. SASE architecture addresses these pain points, providing robust security while promoting efficiency, thus enabling organisations to reallocate resources towards identifying and confronting cybersecurity threats head-on.

### Cybersecurity Threats in the Social Housing Sector

The UK social housing sector has become an increasingly attractive target for cyberattacks. In 2020, one in every four UK social housing organisations fell victim to cyber threats, a number that alarmingly spiked by 92.7% in 2021<sup>1</sup>. Last year, the largest housing association in the UK suffered a major attack, affecting the data security of 124,000 homes and the personal details of numerous residents. This rising trend underscores the urgent need for robust cybersecurity measures within social housing organisations.



<sup>1</sup> <https://housingdigital.co.uk/building-our-defences-how-housing-associations-can-prepare-for-cyber-threats-yorkshire-housing/>

# 5 Harnessing SASE to Modernise Social Housing Tech Infrastructure

Adopting SASE does more than just maintain secure network connections; it provides a reliable foundation for modern technology solutions, enabling housing associations to leapfrog legacy system constraints and enhance their service delivery.

### Enabling Remote Work with SASE:

The shift towards remote work has seen a dramatic increase in data traffic that many organisations are struggling to secure effectively. Here, the need for a security solution that does not add complexity, but instead supports the need for speed and scale, becomes apparent. SASE, with its integrated security and network architecture, is ideally suited to meet these requirements. It effectively secures remote connections, giving staff and tenants safe access to services across the internet. By enabling secure remote work, SASE helps housing associations adapt to this new norm, allowing the provision of high-quality services, irrespective of location.

### Measuring and Improving Service Performance:

Evaluating the effectiveness of SASE implementation necessitates careful monitoring of key performance indicators (KPIs). From network security metrics such as threat detection and response times, to user engagement and satisfaction levels with new digital services, it's vital that housing associations track these metrics and integrate them into ongoing service improvements.

### Tenant Feedback Collection:

As the end-users of digital services, tenants' feedback is an invaluable resource for continuous improvement. It's therefore important to install reliable and secure methods for collecting and analysing this feedback. This makes sure tenants feel heard and that their input directly contributes to the enhancement of digital services.

## 3 Reasons to Start Your SASE Journey Now



### 1. Avoid Technical Debt:

Slow, practical and considered adoption of SASE is advised. Starting with a pilot user group allows you to gain valuable insights before building further technical debt.



### 2. Boost Productivity and Efficiency:

SASE can help identify areas for improvement in productivity, efficiency and effectiveness through better configuration. This is achievable without immediately changing existing products or solutions.



### 3. Lower Total Cost of Ownership (TCO):

SASE offers cost-saving benefits, including flexible licensing, quicker resolution times and operational savings. Embracing SASE now can provide a strong return on investment, financially and operationally.

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# 6 Planning and Implementing SASE Integration in Social Housing

Securing a robust and efficient digital future for social housing demands more than the adoption of cutting-edge technology. It necessitates comprehensive planning and a culture shift, providing assurance that the implementation of SASE contributes to long-lasting change.

## Defining Your SASE Strategy: A Six-Step Approach



**1. Business Operation Assessment:**  
Begin with a thorough audit of your current infrastructure, including apps, users and locations. Identify your “crown jewels,” the most critical parts of your business that need utmost protection. Consider your current and future infrastructure plans.



**2. Vendor & Partner Evaluation:**  
Assess potential SASE vendors and partners based on their offerings, support and alignment with your needs.



**3. Access Requirements & Identity Strategy Definition:**  
Define access requirements for each element of your estate, identifying potential gaps and risks. Develop an identity strategy, detailing how your business identifies and interacts with its various stakeholders. This strategy should cover different user groups, including customers, partners, suppliers and users and aim for least privilege and contextual access.



**4. Operating Model Consideration:**  
Decide whether you will manage SASE in-house or outsource. If you choose the former, make sure your in-house team aligns with this new strategy.



**5. Integration & Migration Planning:**  
Consider integrations for each solution and plan migrations. SASE does not need to be implemented all at once, so plan strategically.



**6. Future Needs Mapping:**  
Identify your target operating model and compare it with the current state to create your SASE roadmap. Consider your governance and policy requirements. Analyse your starting point, considering your strengths, core requirements, existing technology and what can be replaced. This step will help you understand how SASE can align with your future needs.

### Strategy Development:

A successful SASE implementation starts with a clear strategy. This includes setting specific, measurable goals, understanding the technical requirements and defining a sequence of actions. By incorporating these elements, housing associations can better anticipate potential challenges and prepare effective solutions, enabling a smoother and more successful digital transformation.

### Technology Selection and Deployment:

Choosing the right SASE solution requires aligning the technology’s capabilities with the unique needs of the housing association. This requires decision-makers to evaluate different solutions, considering factors like compatibility with existing digital platforms, scalability, security and user-friendliness. They must also follow best practices for deployment, with an emphasis on phased implementation and comprehensive testing.

### Staff Training and Guiding Tenant Experience:

Implementing SASE is not just a technological change; it’s a transformation in working practices and service delivery. It’s important, therefore, to provide comprehensive training for the association’s staff so that they can leverage the new technology effectively. Moreover, provision should be made for educating tenants about new digital services and how to use them, underlining the crucial role of digital inclusion in the successful adoption of SASE.



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# 7 Shaping the Future of Social Housing with Cisco and Focus Group

As you navigate the future of digital transformation in social housing, Cisco and Focus Group can help you on your journey. Our combined expertise and comprehensive solutions uniquely position us to assist housing associations in leveraging SASE infrastructure for their digital transformation initiatives.

## Harnessing Emerging Digital Trends in Social Housing with Cisco and Focus Group:

The digital landscape of social housing is ever-evolving, with new advancements like AI, machine learning and big data analytics offering potential enhancements for tenant services. Through our suite of solutions, Cisco and Focus Group are prepared to help your housing association tap into these trends by having a robust infrastructural layer that can handle the demands of these data-heavy applications. This brings added confidence that you stay at the forefront of digital service provision.

## Leveraging the Potential of SASE:

Cisco's SASE architecture provides a robust foundation for digital transformation. With the solution's adaptability to changes in cloud computing and network security, it remains integral to the digital strategies of social housing providers. Bolstered by Focus Group service capabilities, we can jointly guide housing associations like yours through the transformation process, enabling seamless integration and maximum benefit.

## Boosting Tenant Engagement and Satisfaction:

Our combined commitment to continuous digital enhancements presents a valuable opportunity for housing associations to foster stronger relationships with their tenants. By empowering tenants with improved services, enabling efficient communication and enhancing their overall quality of life, these partnerships can lead to a more sustainable and prosperous future for social housing.





## About Focus Group

Founded in 2003, Focus Group is recognised by Deloitte as one of Europe's fastest growing and most successful tech companies delivering digital transformation projects across the globe. As a Cisco Premier Provider and Elite partner, Focus Group offers a range of services to keep your networks protected, resilient and always available.

We are passionate about technology, specialising in Infrastructure, Security, Cloud and Data Centre solutions, delivering secure, converged and optimised networks to a global client base.

Focus Group consistently ranks within the Sunday Times TechTrack & Deloitte Tech awards following solid financial growth and company performance and operates within the top one percent of EMEA's Cisco partners. In 2022 we won Cisco's UK&I and EMEA Partner of the Year in API and Innovation for our deployments using DevOps and code, recognising commitment, innovation and technical ability with Cisco technology.

## Cisco and Focus Group: Strengths & Core Capabilities

### Technical Capabilities & Expertise:

Combining Cisco's renowned technological leadership with Focus Group's industry-specific knowledge and practical experience, the partnership offers a blend of technical prowess and actionable insights.

### Simplified Solutions:

Cisco and Focus Group provide a simplified, holistic service model that includes single billing, making the management of services easier for clients.

### Reputation & Credibility:

Both Cisco and Focus Group bring a strong credibility, with a proven track record of delivering quality services and solutions. Our established reputations enhance client confidence.

### Brand Strengths:

The combined power of Cisco, a global leader in IT and networking, and Focus Group, a trusted advisor in the housing association sector, producing a strong, reliable partnership that customers can trust and depend upon.

If you're ready to take the next step on your journey towards digital transformation and ensure the security of your social housing organisation, we invite you to explore more about our services. Learn how our comprehensive suite of SASE solutions can empower your organisation to thrive in this new digital era by [visiting our website](https://www.focusgroup.co.uk/enterprise).

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