

Newcastle City Council gains unlimited secure remote access with AEP Netilla® VE

Upgrades to virtual product for compliance and flexibility

It was back in November 2004 that Newcastle City Council first engaged with AEP Networks and one of its leading channel partners in the UK, Enforce Technology Limited, to deliver secure remote access facilities to its significant user base. Although other products were considered at that point, it was the AEP Netilla SSL VPN that was chosen for the task because it was the easiest and most manageable option available on the market for large deployments. This was established through an evaluation process, carried out by Enforce, during which the Netilla appliance proved that it was fit for purpose and that it “did what it said on the tin,” according to John Calder, Managing Director of Enforce.

Although a relatively new technology at that time, the implementation of this SSL VPN solution ran smoothly and continued to deliver on its promise through the next four years. In fact, the implementation remained relatively untouched (with the exception of additional user licenses) until the Council was required to move its mail servers inside its own network as part of the Government Connect programme. It was at this time (November 2008) that Newcastle CC turned once again to Enforce to provide the best possible solution.

Andrew Price, ICT Technical Consultant for Newcastle City Council, comments, “We had been involved with Enforce and AEP Networks for several years when the need to change came about. We were keen to meet the compliance requirements set down by the Government and to gain some additional benefits through the project. The SSL VPN that we had been using to date had done us proud and we had experienced no problems over the years that it was installed. However, with change comes the opportunity to review current systems and it was at this time that the virtual product (Netilla VE) was highlighted to us. It seemed to offer us a degree of flexibility and resilience that a physical product was unable to deliver. In fact, we are now able to cater for almost

unlimited numbers of users because the virtual environment has inherent flexibility.”

The Upgrade Process

As with many upgrade projects, time was of the essence. However, the time scales in this particular instance were dramatically short. The Council needed to have the new system specified, tested, installed and operational in a matter of three to four weeks.

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Price adds, “The project was carried out by Enforce who ran a proof of concept before upgrading the configuration off-site and delivering it back to us for use. There was no downtime for our users and they are not aware that they are now using a virtual product. In fact, the whole project was essentially unnoticed by the users which is a major achievement.”

Added Benefits

Although compliance was the main driver for the project, Newcastle CC has benefitted from several knock-on advantages. For example, with Netilla VE in place, the technology team is able to create test environments that are isolated from the live systems. This allows them to test scenarios before putting them into the live environment which is a distinct advantage when introducing new processes. Also, the virtual Netilla product delivers a much greater level of user flexibility and resilience than the physical set-up. In fact, it almost enables unlimited concurrent users.

As Price noted, “If there was an epidemic in the UK, like Swine Flu, and our staff was not able to come into the office, we would not have been able to scale with the hardware solution. With our physical product we would only be able to allow up to 750 concurrent users which would be an issue in this scenario as we have as many as 7,500 users in the organisation. However, in the virtual world we would be able to easily manipulate the system to enable all staff to work effectively from home and still maintain access to the files that they need to do their jobs.”

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Paul Spencer, SVP of Secure Application Access for AEP Networks, says, "Business continuity is a significant consideration for all local governments to manage disaster situations ranging from floods to viral epidemics. Having an effective, secure, flexible and resilient remote access system in place is a terrific way to cater for all eventualities. With the support of our partners we were able to deliver systems that can cater for customers' day to day needs most efficiently and protect them against any unforeseen situations."

John Calder of Enforce comments, "Implementing a virtual SSL VPN is relatively straightforward and can be done with little or no disruption to existing remote users. Increasing the level of access is also simple as everything is done in software. We do this by creating sub servers in the virtual environment to soak up all users as required. The capacity is there just in case it's needed, so customers can cater for a surge in users at any given point in time."

Looking to the Future

Now that the project has been implemented to the requirements specified, Newcastle CC can look to its future planning. The intention is to take the Council's Outlook Web Access users and have them connect to the council's services through the AEP Netilla SSL VPN Virtual Edition. This will make OWA more secure and dramatically extend the current system implementation.

Price concludes, "The projects carried out to date have been relatively painless and cost effective. We have been able to rely on the systems once

implemented and have pretty much left them untouched. The service and support we have received from both Enforce and AEP Networks has been great and we look forward to further extending our systems and our relationship over the months and years to come."

About AEP Networks

AEP Networks offers secure communications, networking and application access for government, enterprise and carriers. We work with systems integrators, managed service providers and the distribution channel to deliver integrated solutions incorporating our leading edge products:

- Enhanced-grade secure voice and multi-service data platforms (based on the vadOS operating system) that support a wide range of communications protocols and network topologies
- High assurance networking via IPsec-based VPN encryptors for site-to-site security and remote access
- Hardware Security Modules (HSMs) for cryptographic key management and storage
- Secure remote access to networks and applications – including virtual environments – via application-layer security gateways and SSL VPNs.

Headquartered in Somerset, New Jersey, AEP Networks has key hub offices in the United Kingdom (Hemel Hempstead & Ascot), Malaysia and Australia.

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