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PROTECTING THE DATA SYSTEMS OF BRITAIN'S MOST ISOLATED EMERGENCY SERVICES

There are very few organizations in the world that have to face the logistical and geographical challenges Highlands & Islands Fire and Rescue Service (HIFRS) and their 1,500 staff face on a daily basis. HIFRS provides fire, rescue, and community safety services to a vast territory of over 12,000 square miles and funding for the services are determined by the region's somewhat sparse population - so resources are thin on the ground.

With lives at stake, it's natural to prioritize fire-fighting equipment over the demand for investment in the IT infrastructure. Although a late adopter of IT technology, HIFRS created a network linking over 100 outlying locations just four years ago and has grown to support approximately 350 end-users desktops and over a dozen Microsoft SQL®, mail and other servers running Microsoft Exchange®. HIFRS's IT system has proved to be an invaluable addition to their fire-fighting arsenal, especially when it includes features such as an accurate, up-to-the-minute availability roster.

Highlands & Islands Fire and Rescue Service (HIFRS) is the most northerly in the country, covering a geographical area of approximately 12,000 square miles providing a fire, rescue and community safety service to the populations of the Highlands, the Shetland Islands, the Orkney Islands and the Western Isles.

Headquartered in Inverness, HIFRS employs up to 1,500 staff to support a network of 11 district offices, consisting of 1 full time station, 95 retained stations and 27 community response units.

THE CHALLENGE

HIFRS's critical IT infrastructure controls several operational aspects, the most vital being the issuance of emergency response alerts to retained fire fighters across northern Scotland. Communication Manager John Cannon is based at the service's central hub in Inverness, and is responsible for the smooth running of the network. "The retained fire fighters carry pagers, do other jobs during the day and get called out when there is a fire" says Cannon. The automated response system monitors the current status of resources and calculates the nearest available fire engine and personnel.

Network security and integrity is of course of the utmost concern, and Cannon has double-firewalled the system and deployed back-up servers to deal with most contingencies. "We have to exercise fall-back conditions where you might have to leave one building and operate from another one but still keep all the processes in place" explained Cannon, who stresses that resilience is a key word when planning responses to system threats. There are also other vital, though arguably less time sensitive platforms to protect, such as a Windows SharePoint® intranet server hosting a training archive, health and safety information, and technical notes.

Various network nodes including the control room itself are connected to the Internet, requiring added protection from malicious hacking attempts, spam and other malware (such as the recent Conficker outbreak). HIFRS tried various security packages but found them to be too passive for their high-end requirements. "They sit there and don't really do very much and you presume everything is fine," Cannon comments "...but we need something that is more proactive in reassuring us and our users that everything is up-to-date, rather than not telling us anything."

Cannon adds "Potentially it is a fairly big issue to have your entire network shut down because of what most people would regard as a very routine thing, such as a failure in IT security. If such situations are not dealt with properly it can become very embarrassing."

THE SOLUTION

John Cannon sought the advice of a BitDefender Partner that recommended a solution best suited to meet HIFRS's needs. "In terms of seeking out the best product, BitDefender stood out head and shoulders above other competitive solutions, so we signed up for a three-year deal" Cannon recalls.

Having placed the order in March 2008, the next step was deployment and implementation - and Cannon was keen to get a BitDefender Partner on board to ensure things went as smoothly as possible. "When you change things there are always teething problems. It's never the case that it's just flick a switch and there you go – all done." Cannon continues "We realized it was going to be a bit of a learning curve, so when our BitDefender Partner offered a monthly review service as an add-on to the product, we went for it. Now one of the BitDefender Partner team logs in remotely to our system and looks around to check everything is how it should be."

THE RESULT

Cannon derives considerable peace of mind from the protection provided by BitDefender and the additional support he receives from his BitDefender Partner. "We tend to be too busy on other things to schedule exhaustive checks ourselves and we find that to be the most important part of the service. We are very happy to pay that wee bit extra to get someone to come in who knows the system and is familiar with it to look around, tweak things and give us a report saying yes, everything is fine."

THE CONCLUSION

Of the latest implementation, the BitDefender Partner commented "While Internet Security is of paramount importance to all our clients, having Fire and Rescue Service on our books underlines the significance of malware protection in mission critical environments. Our work with Highlands & Islands shows how the BitDefender Partner service support complements BitDefender's proven technology."

ABOUT BITDEFENDER

BitDefender is the creator of one of the industry's fastest and most effective lines of internationally certified security software. Since inception in 2001, BitDefender has continued to raise the bar and set new standards in proactive threat prevention. Every day, BitDefender protects tens of millions of home and corporate users across the globe - giving them the peace of mind of knowing that their digital experiences will be secure. BitDefender solutions are distributed by a global network of value-added distribution and reseller partners in more than 100 countries worldwide.

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