Protecting the IT infrastructure of Britain's most dispersed emergency service network.

The Organisation

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.

Introduction

If asked to address the logistical problems HIFRS's 1,500 staff face on a daily basis, many would ring the emergency services for help. HIFRS has a vast territory to cover but its funding is determined by the region's somewhat sparse population so resources are thin on the ground. With lives at stake it's natural to prioritise fire-fighting equipment over demand for investment in IT, and needless to say the service was a late adopter - creating a network linking over 100 outlying locations only four years ago.

The challenge

HIFRS's IT system controls a several operational aspects, the most vital being the issuing 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 John, who adds this is handled by an automated system that monitors the current status of resources also calculates the nearest available fire engine and personnel. There are other vital, though arguably less time-sensitive needs to be met, such as a sharepoint intranet server hosting a training archive of latest news, health and safety information and technical notes. With around 350 end-users desktops and a dozen other SQL, mail and other servers running MS 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.

Network security and integrity is of course of the utmost concern, and John has double-firewalled the system and has 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,' says John, who stresses that resilience is a key word when planning responses to system threats.

bitdefender

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). . John says that 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,' he says, '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 – if you like.'

He adds: 'Potentially it is a fairly big issue to have your 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 sought the advice of Security IP (SIP), the UK's foremost threat protection consultants who recommended a product that would best suit HIFRS's needs. 'In terms of seeking out the best solution BitDefender stood out head and shoulders above the competitors. We signed up for a three-year deal.'

Having placed the order in March 2008, the next step was implementation and John was keen to get SIP 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.'

John continues: 'We realised it was going to be a bit of a learning curve, so when SIP offered a monthly review as an add-on we went for it. Now one of the service delivery team comes in remotely and looks around to check everything is how it should be.

'We have survived some hectic times, especially when Conficker was about, but were fine once we realised that BitDefender could cope with it.'

Result

John derives considerable peace of mind from the support he receives from Security IP. 'We tend to be too busy on other things to schedule run 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.'

'I can say that since installation, settling in and taking up the SIP housekeeping service we have been more than satisfied. It's nice to go to bed at night knowing that everything is taken care of,' says John.

Commenting on this latest implementation, Security IP managing director, Andi Robinson said: "While Internet Security is of paramount importance to all our clients, having Fire and Rescue Service on our books underlines the significance in mission critical environments. Our work with Highlands & Islands shows how the Security IP service support complements BitDefender's proven technology."

About BitDefender ®

BitDefender is a leading global provider of security solutions that satisfy the protection requirements of today's computing environment. The company offers one of the industry's fastest and most effective lines of security software, setting new standards for threat prevention, timely detection and mitigation.

BitDefender delivers products and services to over 41 million home and corporate users in more than 180 countries. BitDefender has offices in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain and Romania. Further information about BitDefender can be obtained by visiting: **http://www.bitdefender.co.uk**

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