

Newport's forward-thinking IT strategy gets the green light

Overview

■ Customer challenge

Newport City Council is extending the reach of its award-winning customer contact centre and streamlining more of its back-office processes, but wanted to do so without increasing the carbon footprint of its already cramped data centre. It also wanted to ensure its systems could operate 24/7

■ Solution

IBM's solution was to consolidate the workload of nine existing servers, and replace them with two IBM System p computers, with virtualised storage managed by IBM's SVC software. Dual servers and storage also provide high availability and resilience.

■ Customer benefits

- Power consumption will be cut by around 15%, helping to meet the Council's ambitious green agenda.
- Newport City Council will see a better performance from its IT investments, ultimately giving citizens more value for money.
- This forward-looking solution provides extra flexibility, frees up space in the centre and reduces the risk of computer down time.



Newport stands at the gateway between England and Wales and has built on its rich heritage to create a thriving centre of industry and commerce. It became a County Borough in 1996 and was granted city status in 2002 – the year of the Queen's Golden jubilee – making it the newest city in Wales. Covering about 74 square miles and with a population of around 140,000, it is the eighth largest authority in Wales.

The Council is a major employer, with around 7,500 staff, and has an annual budget of £300 million. Its strategy for a sustainable future is set out in its Local Agenda 21, which gives energy usage, transport and waste management as its main targets.

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About four years ago, the City Council launched a contact centre, with the aim of delivering all of its services to the public electronically, and IBM won a competitive tender to provide the necessary hardware. The contact centre, which employs 60 highly-trained staff, went on to win several awards.

Newport has been recognised nationally for the quality of the service it provides through its contact centre, which is supported by a staff development programme. This ensures employees are fully trained to maintain the high quality of services.

Catalyst for change

Over the past few years, the Council has gradually moved more work onto the current IBM hardware platform and in 2005 decided to complement the Oracle CRM software with several other large-scale applications – such as Human Resources and Payroll.

“The contact centre became a catalyst for change within our IT operations,” explains Mark Neilson, Head of Information Systems and Communications at Newport. “We did a fair amount of back-office re-engineering and moved more applications over onto the servers,

reducing paperwork and manual administration along the way. But having done this, we realised we needed to consolidate our IT and needed to find the best strategy for the future.

“We also wanted to provide fail-over for our systems to complement our in house technical support. As our contact centre is open until 8pm on a Friday, as well as on Saturday mornings, we needed to make sure that, if there were any problems, the system could carry on operating until technical support staff were able to respond.”

More responsive to business needs

Another challenge for Newport was the lack of available space in the data centre. A specialist IBM team therefore worked with Council staff and completed a full analysis of the installed server infrastructure, looking at overall performance, as well as the use of heat, power and space. They also considered current and future business requirements, the environmental impact, and opportunities to cut costs. A storage team ran a similar exercise to look at multi-tiered – or virtualised – storage.

Virtualisation enables computing resources, such as processors and memory, to be shared and used much more effectively than in a traditional server environment.

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Choosing this route simplifies system management, improves operational efficiency and flexibility and also lowers the total cost of ownership.

“Many organisations still make decisions about their IT operations without considering the environment,” says Tracy McKim, Newport’s IT Infrastructure Manager. “But the green agenda was always a central part of our discussions. This solution means we can replace older, power-hungry storage facilities and servers with smaller, more efficient machines. It not only frees up space in our data centre, it will reduce the costs of energy and air conditioning.

“If we hadn’t taken the decision to implement the IBM solution, we would not have been able to maintain the high level of service through the contact centre and people would certainly have noticed the difference.”

Forward- thinking authority

Many councils have embarked on Customer Relationship Management systems, but few have implemented them as well as Newport City Council, which was highly commended as an accessible council in the Excellence Wales awards recently.

Newport is also quite unusual in opting for a virtualised environment, which – although popular among the much larger local authorities – is not common among councils of its size.

“We are forward-looking, but we’re not pioneers. We prefer to use technology that has been tried and tested, as it is in this case,” adds Mark Neilson. “It is quite unusual for an authority of our size to implement this type of solution, but it makes excellent business sense. Also, as we don’t have round-the-clock IT support in-house, it is much more cost effective to have resilience built into the system, which we have done.

“By consolidating our infrastructure we will be able to make indirect savings in power consumption and we will be able to improve the level of service we provide for our customer-facing staff as well as the citizens of Newport.”

The solution was implemented by Anix, one of IBM’s leading Business Partners in the local government market.

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