

REIGATE AND BANSTEAD BOROUGH COUNCIL LEADS IN VOICE CONTINUITY

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council is a trailblazer in terms of complying with continuity regulations that local authorities must act upon regarding business continuity arrangements.

The need for robust continuity provision is specified in the Civil Contingencies Act, which local authorities must now comply with. So Reigate and Banstead Borough Council has adopted a voice communication business continuity system to ensure that the phones never go silent.

The Civil Contingencies Bill became an Act of Parliament on 18 November 2004. The Act replaces older legislation regarding the duty that councils have for ensuring the continuity of services and facilities in the event of major emergencies and other types of serious civic incidents.

The scope of the new Act now covers telephony as well as IT communications as services that local authorities need to support with contingency plans. These services must be resilient to the risk of failure and measures need to be taken to ensure service continuity.

The Civil Contingencies Act demands that local authorities have contingency planning, emergency planning and business continuity management in place. Councils are also classed as Category One Responders if an emergency occurs.

This puts great emphasis on these organisations being prepared for any eventuality. The task is not just about having continuity plans, but also maintaining the plans and keeping readiness levels of all communications systems.

Focus on voice continuity

The Civil Contingencies Act specifies a broad-based approach to maintaining vital services and systems in a persistent manner. In the digital age IT infrastructure has been the main focus of attention. Voice communications have been mostly treated as an 'always available' utility.

Yet the loss of telephony communication will cause a major interruption for any organisation. Such an event can even be considered an emergency in its own right. Arguably, local councils are hit harder when the phones go silent given the responsibilities they carry for the populace at large.

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council is responsible for an area that covers a population of around 126,000 people and has to provide core council services, local taxation, benefits and street care, amongst others. Without question, the loss of voice communications would bring serious disruption to the council's effectiveness.

For instance, people living within the council's boundaries would not be able to call to get information and make transactions, or alert the council about problems. Even the standard voice messaging facilities would be down if the telecoms cut out.



Just as importantly, the council would face serious disruption to its internal activities, with email not being capable of filling the gap left by lost inbound and outbound voice communication.

Seeking a persistent voice service

In order to comply with The Civil Contingencies Act, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council gave a team responsibility for developing service continuity around the council's voice network and finding the best technology solution.

Linda Neale, projects and emergency planning manager at the council was instrumental in moving the voice continuity project forward with the help of Alan Morris, project support officer. In fact, the Council had already been actively evaluating the possible business continuity choices in advance of The Civil Contingencies Act becoming law.

"We knew there was an issue in terms of continuity for the telephone service and The Civil Contingencies Act heightened our interest in solving this problem," Linda Neale says. "We looked at a number of options and demos and then we came across GemaTech at the Business Continuity Expo in 2004." The Council were required to carry out due diligence and considered a number of other solutions alongside the GemaTech system.

"We looked at a number of telecoms suppliers but none of the solutions on offer matched GemaTech", comments Linda Neale.

Linda Neale was impressed by the GemaTech business continuity system. "We were interested in the ease of installation and the flexibility of the GemaTech BCM^{LITE} capability as we needed to cover a range of situations," she says. The fact that the GemaTech system is located at the local NTL exchange was also a plus point for the Council.

The Council's business continuity plan was also required to cater for any situation, which resulted in loss of access to the main council site in Reigate. In fact, Reigate and Banstead Council is highly centralised. Apart from the Town Hall there is a much smaller site at Earlswood Depot as well as some small satellite offices providing a local Help Shop service. This high degree of centralisation made it important for the council to be able to divert all of its voice systems to a back-up location quickly and easily

As part of earlier contingency provision, the Council also has access to a 16-line mini switch that is located remotely from the Town Hall and could be used to front the Council's operational numbers. Even so, this alternative telephone system can only provide a message taking service.

Such circumstances made it apparent to the Project Team that the Council required a highly flexible business continuity system. The fact that the GemaTech solution was able to re-route calls to any other location specified was another major plus in the vendor's favour compared to its rivals.

Benefits

The GemaTech system has cost the council £16,000 plus annual maintenance, along with the cost of the ISDN-30 connection that is also required. The system went live at



the Council in July 2005 and they have already benefited from the system being in place and the Council is confident it now has the business continuity it needs.

In the event of failure, the voice services will now be re-routed within seconds and no one would notice any difference – the service is transparent to customers, and Reigate and Banstead Borough Council has a business continuity solution in place that helps the organisation comply with the key requirements of the Civil Contingencies Act.

Linda Neale says that the success of the telecoms business continuity project has been shared with other organisations in the Surrey area, in particular the Reigate and Banstead Housing Trust were keen to find out more about the telecoms continuity project at Reigate and Banstead.

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