

Case Study Solutions Childcare

Located across Herefordshire and Monmouthshire, Solutions Childcare provides a range of residential and fostering services catering to the needs of up to 40 youngsters aged between 10 and 17. Solutions is adding the finishing touches to a networked infrastructure based on NetPilot secure UTM appliances across 11 sites that will support a demanding diversity of needs and applications.

Although residential childcare does not necessarily entail 'permanent' placement for the young people involved, an average stay with Solutions is for 18 months, with children often moving between the different homes as their needs evolve. Part of Solutions' network remit is to provide the same access to the benefits of technology that any young person would have otherwise had. This includes internet and email access.

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NetPilot
Internet Security

Bringing the internet to young people in a vulnerable situation touches on many highly sensitive issues. Security is paramount. Solutions' case has the added dimension in that the organization also operates two schools – and so its IT system must also provide a platform for online teaching aids and eLearning initiatives.

Building a network infrastructure that would facilitate internet access and email services for curricular, extracurricular and recreational activities posed what was initially a dilemma. Solutions Childcare managing director David Massey recalls: 'We thought we couldn't have everything running on one hardware platform. We needed a solution where tight control would not compromise overall flexibility. At the same time it had to be simple and relatively easy to manage within the constraints of our in-house resources.'

The requirement for Solutions Childcare to enhance its external and internal networked communications grew in line with the addition of new residential homes, and with the expectations of staff and the children themselves. In addition to providing access to the online world, the system also had to support virtual private networks (VPNs) that enable Solutions staff to keep track of individual children's progress and help condition their development within the care environment.

This generates a lot of information that must be carefully and securely administered, reveals Massey: 'We are mandated to maintain meticulous – and prodigious – records on the individuals in our charge. The records we keep are extensive for several reasons. First, of course, we need to log the personal backgrounds of young people who may have arrived from a succession of children's homes and/or foster homes, for whatever reason.'

The Solutions online reporting system is integral to its ability to share information with co-operative bodies and other care agencies: to apply equanimity and

continuity to each individual's progress, and to ensure that factors affecting their experience and progress are properly cross-referenced against data from all the care professionals they come into contact with.

These will form part of their personal histories as they grow older, and may prove valuable for those children whose sense of personal history has been disrupted by circumstances.

The Solutions Childcare team's first task was to harmonise the local area networks at each of its residential units, which took about six months, before installing their NetPilot appliances. Nine are already up and running, with two about to be installed, pending the resolution of wide-area connectivity issues. Some sites, where buildings are adjacent, share NetPilot use. Just under half the sites are connected via ADSL broadband and the rest currently rely on ISDN links although it is planned that these will be using broadband within the next year.

'The NetPilot devices facilitate exactly the level of control over internet access and email traffic that we must impose,' says Massey. 'This is a thorny area: the children use the system to access the web for recreational as well as academic uses, so we need a degree of flexibility. Security and access controls are key.'

He continues: 'The URL filtering provided by NetPilot is a vital feature, because obviously we need to maintain lists of sites that can be accessed, and lists of sites that can not.' How does the Solutions team decide these lists? 'We use the category blocking system from N2H2 (bundled with NetPilot),' adds Solutions Childcare's Head of IT Jeanie Robertson. 'Staff are asked to let us know of any sites that might make it through this – but so far we haven't heard of any.'

All incoming, outgoing, and internal emails are boundary-scanned for viruses (via Sophos-powered software – also bundled), and other types of malevolent code. Solutions also needs to be sure that its users are protected from spam wherever possible, particularly those which younger persons might be inclined to reply to. External hacking is another important threat that NetPilot protects against: it is a repugnant reality that childrens homes are targeted.

'NetPilot was a great fit to our requirement – it does exactly what it says on the box,' concludes Massey.

'Our commitment to it as a core platform has the added benefit that NetPilot's general development direction is progressing in the same direction as ours.'

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