The power of knowing

Mole Valley District Council is located in central Surrey and covers the main towns of Leatherhead, Dorking and surrounding areas providing local government services for a population of approximately 80,000 people.

With increasing amounts of sensitive information held on local systems linked into Central Government, Mole Valley took the decision to enhance security controls for managing data at the Council with two main objectives; to connect to the Government Connect Secure Extranet (GCSx) and provide a secure environment for staff working from home.

The Challenge

To ensure that classified information could be exchanged securely with local authorities, the UK government has created the GCSx Code of Connection (CoCo). CoCo is a list of approximately 90 security controls with which all local authorities must comply in order to connect directly with the central government extranet. This applies to any Local Authority that has a direct connection as well as those that connect via an aggregated gateway.

This secure infrastructure became mandatory for local and central government systems communication from April 1st 2009. To achieve compliance, local authorities must provide secure access to data through multi-factor authentication, tailor their local mail services to be compatible with the secure Government Connect Mail solution and meet stringent information governance standards.

In addition, Mole Valley District Council has a long established home working policy in place. As part of their commitment to provide good value services and flexible working conditions, those able and willing to undertake their work from home - subject to complying with health and safety requirements - are permitted to do so.

So the challenge for Bob Thomas, Head of IT at Mole Valley, and his team was how to comply and yet still provide council staff with the same flexible working arrangements - finding a way to continue providing a full range of services to citizens, all within a limited budget.

Mole Valley gave network infrastructure and security experts, Xpertex the brief to deliver a flexible, cost-effective secure solution within the deadline, using as much of the existing hardware as possible.

The Solution

The main challenge for Xpertex was to find a way to provide access to secure internal, user-based applications as well as remote access to external applications with end user device verification. The solution identified as the right option to meet the needs of Mole Valley was based on an AEP Netilla Application gateway combined with the Swivel's multi-factor authentication

SWIVEL
the power of knowing

system and the Becrypt Disk Protect and Trusted Client™ products.

The AEP Netilla SSL VPN is a secure application access gateway that enables web browser access to a broad range of business applications. Swivel provides a strong authentication solution with options to use a mobile phone and a standard web-browser or just the web-browser alone, which enables the councils' authorised users to confirm their identity from both inside the network or from a remote location without the need for a physical user ID token.

GCSx CoCo Compliance
The flexibility of Swivel enabled Mole Valley to meet the strict two-factor authentication requirements of the GCSx CoCo standard without the costs and management headaches normally associated with other 2FA technologies. When a user needs to access their desk top environment they are sent a randomly generated security string directly to the AEP login interface as an obfuscated GIF or to a standard mobile phone in the form of an SMS message, depending on their location and level of access required.

The choice of Swivel was a critical factor in enabling Mole Valley to meet the CoCo requirements whilst at the same time reducing the need, to provide dedicated client devices for staff working from home or remote locations outside the network.

Return on Investment
The working solution meets the council's overall objectives for GCSx CoCo compliance whilst at the same time dramatically reducing the costs associated with managing the existing desktop estate or providing home users with dedicated laptops as well as significantly reducing the high maintenance costs that would have been associated with providing each user with a dedicated physical ID token.

Authenticating 3rd Party Support
As a further benefit Mole Valley Council has been able to place all permitted 3rd Party organisations on the Swivel database and set temporary, strong Netilla VPN passwords. When the Council logs a support call with a 3rd party helpdesk, that requires access to a system to enable a fix, a process is initiated which enables access without compromising on security.

This has clearly improved on 3rd party support for applications at Mole Valley. Previously, each supplier was offered a locked account which they had to request to open by email. The secure solution also helps to streamline tasks as the IT team no longer need to get involved in individual requirements resulting in the process now being managed and tracked by a single person.

Future Development
As well as meeting the day to day operational requirements of the council the new system has also been designed to ensure that Mole Valley can continue to deliver essential services in the case of a major disaster such as a fire or flood where emergency plans would come into force.

This could also include the possibility for the need to respond to a pandemic situation where key staff would be able to continue to work securely from home and enable the council to smoothly transition to an emergency DR footing should any of these situations arise in the future.