in·tuition

Customer Case Study

Essex County Council

In-Tuition migrates GCSX mail for Essex County Council from legacy Microsoft Exchange service to UKCloud hosted Zimbra Collaboration Server

A smooth migration of users and data providing a scalable and fully managed GCSX email system with improved compliance and monitoring control; speeding up users' access to GCSX secure email; and reducing support and software licensing costs.

"This was a high profile project within the Council, involving many stakeholders and complex technical problems to resolve. In-Tuition handled it very well, providing us with confidence and clarity at every stage. There were many moments where they could have reasonably said 'no' and referred to contracts, but instead got stuck in and delivered solutions. Their approach was straightforward and refreshing."

Steven Tredinnick, Head of IS Projects, Essex CC

Essex County Council (Essex CC) is one of the largest local authorities in the UK, with more than 7,000 employees delivering services to around 1.7 million residents. These services range from highways and libraries to education and social care provision. Headquartered in Chelmsford, the council is dedicated to improving Essex and the lives of residents. It plans to achieve this by providing effective and efficient services that deliver real value for money and encouraging prosperity through innovation.

Towards the end of 2016, Essex CC were rapidly completing an extensive programme of enhancements to the Public Secure Network (PSN) infrastructure within County Hall which would allow faster and more streamlined access to PSN based services for staff.

The legacy GCSX mail platform, based on Microsoft Exchange 2007, was soon to be end of life. Designed as a temporary solution for a small number of users and hosted off-site by a third party. To access the system required users to undertake a convoluted series of connections simply to read and reply to email.

"Connectivity to our legacy GCSX system was via a capacity restricted network path and egress via the PSN was over a limited, third party controlled link. We had also experienced a great deal of staff demand for the service which had increased way beyond what the system was designed to handle - so as a consequence performance and user experience had deteriorated. Further, our help desk had to escalate all requests for user additions, modifications and deletions because the platform could not be managed from County Hall." **Ron Isted, Portfolio/Programme Manager at Essex CC**

The teams within Essex CC who send and receive GCSX secure mail are often dealing with highly sensitive and critical emails - including mail relating to children at risk. They routinely deal with hundreds of emails a day. Therefore any replacement system would need to facilitate the existing workflows and migration would need to be unobtrusive.

GCSX email data is covered by strict policies and data should never leave the confines of the PSN. Due to the volume of data, migrating across the legacy PSN link directly to any new provider was not feasible as it would slow down use of the legacy service. Along with the need to ensure continued access to critical historic emails, this presented a significant data migration challenge.

The configuration of the legacy system could not be relied upon as a basis to generate the Zimbra provisioning source files. This was because of three factors. The rapid and organic growth of the legacy GCSX platform; the fact that Essex CC had no direct access to the platform; and because of the way in which users accessed shared resources on the legacy system. Therefore, a completely bespoke set of CSV files would be required.

Mail routing changes for GCSX mail domains must be made in writing to Vodafone, who provide a 5 day SLA on responses. Further, all GCSX mail domains must be registered with Vodafone. This ruled out using the legacy server to forward mail to a temporary migration domain, as one might do in a more standard migration, further complicating matters.

A replacement for the legacy GCSX Exchange Server platform

Essex CC selected Zimbra Collaboration Server hosted by UKCloud after extensive evaluation. Some of the key reasons were:

Zimbra is browser based and easy to use. Users would be able to adapt with minimal training, whilst the Council would not need to provide client side software specifically for GCSX email, thus reducing licensing and support costs. By leveraging Essex CC's investment in their new PSN infrastructure, logging into Zimbra over the PSN would be very straight forward – thereby reducing frustration and help desk calls.

UKCloud provide a compliant and fully managed PSN connected Zimbra service priced per user. The service includes delegated admin control so that Essex CC would be able to easily add and remove users via a web based administration interface at any time. This would significantly increase the agility of the help desk and reduce the number of interactions required to close a ticket. The per user pricing model would provide predictable and clear costs covering the entire solution.

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A Reliable Partner To Carry Out the Migration

In-Tuition Networks are long established Zimbra Gold Partners and UKCloud professional services partners. Essex CC selected In-Tuition Networks to design and implement a migration to move the users from the legacy Exchange server to Zimbra Collaboration Server hosted by UKCloud.

"We wanted a partner we could trust to manage the migration from end to end and who could work with our selected Zimbra provider - UKCloud. In-Tuition's professional services and UKCloud's Zimbra service are both available via G-Cloud which made procurement very straightforward and in addition, both parties were happy to sign a separate collaboration agreement formalising their co-operation on this project." **Steven Tredinnick, Head of IS Projects at Essex CC**

As well as being the lead partner for the project and providing customised training and documentation, In-Tuition's primary responsibilities were to:

- Help Essex CC to understand how Zimbra could be customised in a shared hosting environment to ensure best compliance and security for the Council and its GCSX teams.

- Design, document and implement a set-up within UKCloud's shared Zimbra service which would make it easy and intuitive for users to transition to the Zimbra service, specifically with regard to how they would access shared resources. The configuration also needed to be straightforward to maintain as users were added and removed. Further, because Zimbra is priced per mailbox, the implementation would need to ensure the least number of mailboxes were provisioned in order to reduce costs.

- Create a process to capture and validate which users to migrate and which groups they should belong to. The data captured from this process would feed into the provisioning phase, so needed to be carefully validated to ensure completeness and that the right people only had the access they were authorised for.

- Securely migrate the data whilst ensuring minimal interruption for users, the most challenging aspect of the project, given the constraints.

The Project

The proposed solution design was first demonstrated and then evaluated using a test deployment. Once key stakeholders within the Council had been able to provide feedback, the final solution was provisioned according to the Council's specifications at UKCloud using automation scripts designed by In-Tuition.

During the scripted provisioning at UKCloud, the mailboxes which would be accessed by multiple users were shared to distribution lists. Then, the users who required access to a shared mailbox were added to the corresponding distribution list. In that way, the users of the list inherited the rights granted to the distribution list.

To migrate the data, In-Tuition evaluated various approaches. These included the use of Zimbra supplied Exchange to Zimbra migration tool; IMAP to IMAP synchronisation; and physically transporting (and importing into Zimbra) PST data files on a portable encrypted hard disk. All of these methods were ruled out, either because of lack of available bandwidth on the legacy PSN link (first two options) or because of the amount of time it would take to export the PST files, transport the disk from Chelmsford to UKCloud in Farnborough and then import the data in the heavily restricted UKCloud environment.

"Quite apart from the overall complexity of the project and the nature of the data we were dealing with, this was the most challenging element of the project. In-Tuition constantly impressed us with their flexible approach and ability to work around problems. In this case, coming up with a hybrid approach to migrate the data. We would export the PST files to encrypted disk and transport it from the legacy environment (close by) and then directly import the data into the UKCloud Zimbra environment across our new much faster PSN link." **Ron Isted, Portfolio/Programme Manager at Essex CC**

The data migration process was tested and automated to reduce human error and increase speed. On the day of the migration, users were locked out of their legacy mailbox late in the afternoon and the PST export was commenced. Vodafone changed mail routing to UKCloud so that new emails were available to the already set-up users very soon after the change. Data import to Zimbra was started and continued to the next morning. A verification process identified 5 inconsistent mailboxes which were reimported and by mid morning the migration project was completed.

Results

"As a result of all the careful planning and testing, the migration progressed extremely smoothly on the day. Despite problems with the mail routing change, which was outside our collective control, users experienced only a few hours of working day interruption which exceeded our expectations." **Ron Isted, Portfolio/Programme Manager at Essex CC**

GCSX team users adapted to the new platform very quickly and reported that they like the ease of access to their secure mail.

The Essex CC Help Desk team are able to add and remove users very quickly. This has resulted in much faster response times for GCSX related tickets and reduced frustration which means help desk staff take less time to support the GCSX mail system.

Compliance is easier to monitor and control due to improved administration access, policy controls and a systemised deployment.