

How Sapphire is Helping Keep Devon's Data's Safe



Devon County Council is one of the UK's largest local authorities. It has 16,000 staff and manages a total of 750,000 people. The Council is responsible for ensuring the provision of a broad range of important local services for these people including schools, social care, roads, public transport, consumer advice and waste disposal and recycling. In carrying out this responsibility, it needs to maintain and protect vast quantities of often sensitive data.

Conscious of this critical requirement, the Council is committed to implementing robust security solutions and rigorous working practices. In pursuing this objective, it recently decided to seek compliance with the globally recognised standard for information security, ISO27001. This move was made still more urgent by the need to achieve compliance with a growing range of external standards. These include the Government Connect programme, the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS) as well as a raft of other initiatives yet to be fully implemented.

Devon County Council understood that the penalties for non-compliance can be severe. It was also aware of the significant overlap between all of these standards and ISO27001. By moving to ISO27001 and having its compliance assessed and verified by an independent body, it saw the opportunity to significantly reduce the workload and cost of achieving compliance.

Putting Plans into Action

Having made the decision to pursue ISO27001, Devon County Council then began a tender process to find a partner to help to achieve this goal.

The council drew up a short-list of candidates, consisting of three security consultancies, one of whom was Stockton-on-Tees-based information security advisor, Sapphire. After a thorough assessment process, Devon decided to award the contract to Sapphire.

It was attracted by the breadth of expertise demonstrated by the Sapphire consultants together with the company's extensive experience in conducting successful security projects for other local authorities across the UK such as Durham, Derbyshire, Oxford and Northumbria County Council.



The Council decided to focus initially on enhancing data security within the adult and children's services directorates and the corporate IT function. These complex areas of the authority contained the greatest volume of data and also the most sensitive information.

Once it had received the go-ahead, Sapphire began work immediately. Its prior experience with other local authorities enabled it to start by pre-preparing appropriate templates.

It then carried out a benchmarking exercise, known as a gap analysis, which examined approximately 130 controls within ISO27001 which organisations need to have in place to ensure that their information is secure. Each control contained five positioning statements ranging from 'fully compliant' through to 'no security in place'. The objective was to pinpoint where the council was currently, in relation to each control, and where it needed to be in order to comply with ISO27001 specifications.

Peter Hoskin, Corporate Information Governance Manager, Strategic Intelligence, Devon County Council, commented: "We were pleased to see that many of the controls that we needed to implement were already in place. In fact, about 50 per cent needed no additional action at all, although there was work that still needed to be done in some areas to bring all of our systems and processes up to scratch."

Sapphire worked quickly in conjunction with the Council to put together an action plan covering all the work required, together with a full risk assessment for systems in use.

Devon County Council has subsequently consolidated all material in properly constructed work plans, ensuring that there is a clear structure for the project roll-out.

Inevitably some work will need to be integrated within other larger IT initiatives currently taking place within the Council. However, the project has been proceeding rapidly so far and individual milestones are being hit.



Hearts and Minds

For Hoskin, effective Information Security is as much about engaging with people as it is about implementing technology. "However effective the security systems that have been installed, the key challenge of this kind of project is to win the 'hearts and minds' of people," he said. "We need to ensure our employees understand that there are compelling reasons for strengthening passwords or encrypting sensitive data, for example."

Sapphire advised Devon County Council of the critical need to make new security policies clear, concise and easy to understand when issued to employees.



Devon County Council is currently consolidating its information security processes into a single personal policy that gives individual members of staff clear guidelines on what they must or must not do.

Positive Prospects

Hoskin said, "Sapphire has done an excellent job. They have extensive experience and expertise in this area and they have approached this project in a pragmatic way.

"They have been very helpful at translating the technical requirements of the standard into language that is easy to understand," he continued. We have been impressed with their expertise and commitment to this project and they have been open and responsive throughout."

While potential challenges remain concerning the future shape of local government within Devon, the County Council is now looking forward to achieving full compliance with the ISO27001 standard. Sapphire has played a critical role in helping it to fulfil its ongoing commitment to keep Devon's data safe.

