



SMOOTHWALL SOLUTION GIVES UNITY SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP SOMETHING TO SHOUT ABOUT

Schools and Academies Partnership

Collaborative, innovative approach to education

25 Primary, Secondary and Special schools teaching more than 10,000 children

The Unity Schools Partnership (USP) includes 25 schools and academies located within the Cambridgeshire, Essex and Suffolk borders. While recognising the unique characteristics of individual partners, USP strives to encourage value-adding interdependence. This enables each member to achieve its aims and leverage the advantages offered by a sustainable, collaborative approach to education provision.

The Challenge

Safeguarding students and preventing access to inappropriate internet content is critically important in the education sector. USP relied upon a Smoothwall Web-filtering/Firewall solution provided under an existing broadband agreement with Suffolk County Council. However, the 'arm's length' nature of the agreement meant it had minimal control over how it was deployed across its multiple sites.

"What we really wanted was to bring the Smoothwall solution in house to host and manage it ourselves," said Michael Vaughan, USP Director of IT. "It would give us greater autonomy as to how it could be most effectively deployed for what we wanted to achieve - a standardised, consistent platform for delivering tighter control and improved services for our future expansion plans."

Critical Success Factors

- Compliance with safeguarding agenda
- Minimise external cyber-attacks
- Deliver in-house control of firewall and network security

The Solution

Softcat had an existing relationship with USP having collaborated on an earlier hosted endpoint security project. It had been a big success and Softcat had identified the most fit-for-purpose solution, Trend Worry-Free Services, secured a great price with the vendor and assisted with its implementation.

"One of the complicating factors for this project was the fact that we already used a Smoothwall solution through our existing agreement with the local authority," said Michael. "Our previous experience proved how strong Softcat's vendor relationships are. It's one of the reasons why we approached it with a

view to helping us negotiate a new deal with Smoothwall, as unbundling the firewall from the broadband agreement could have proved prohibitively expensive.”

“We carried out a lot of preparatory work with USP before approaching the vendor,” said Tyler Furne, Softcat account manager. “A range of potential solutions were explored, based on the required functionality identified during our project scoping discussions and a Smoothwall offering was clearly the standout contender. We contacted the vendor and negotiated a significant discount for USP as well as arranging a favourable finance agreement to help with upfront costs.”

Prior to the solution implementation, Softcat created spreadsheets based on the essential required parameters for all USP sites and spent many hours liaising with the USP IT team to ensure a smooth implementation schedule. Softcat also arranged for Smoothwall specialists to be on call to assist with any implementation issues and the entire deployment was achieved without any noticeable effect on service delivery.

“We now have a secure, flexible and scalable firewall in place and the migration to the in-house solution was achieved with the minimum of fuss,” said Michael. “The groundwork Softcat put in really paid off and it’s enabled us to cost effectively source the centralised control we needed.”

Solution highlights

- Extensive preparatory work to scope solution parameters
- Vendor intermediation and financial support
- Smoothwall firewall implementation
- Secure, in-house solution deployed with minimal disruption



The Benefits

Enabling USP to gain centralised control of its network security infrastructure has been the main benefit. The combination of Trend Worry-Free Services and the Smoothwall firewall ensures that threats from external cyber-attacks, including ransomware and DDOS attempts, have been minimised. The Smoothwall implementation has also helped to improve services overall, with slow networking speeds and patchy connectivity now a thing of the past.

“The new solution doesn’t just offer enhanced threat protection,” said Michael. “It’s given us much improved flexibility when it comes to fine-tuning access to certain content types to help students enhance their skills. Gaming, for instance, is a sector experiencing phenomenal growth and students need access to certain platforms to learn the skills they’ll need for a rewarding career.

“With the old system in place, providing safe access to such resources was at best problematic and at worst impossible. Now we can safely deliver selective access to resources that we would otherwise have been unable to provide. It’s eliminated a major frustration for our students. The old firewall was effectively a blunt instrument that blocked content indiscriminately, now we can precisely filter access to resources that are beneficial to their education.”

The Smoothwall implementation has provided USP with the proactive monitoring tools it needs to both comply with the keeping children safe agenda and respond to any emerging safeguarding concerns. Already, the new system has highlighted safeguarding issues that USP were previously unaware of and enabled the IT team to take preventative action in pretty much real time.

USP has ambitious expansion plans and the improvements in network security provide the foundation for enhanced services down the line. It is confident that it can comfortably scale services to meet any future demands and having a secure, resilient and high performing IT infrastructure in place will prove to be an attractive driver for future partners. The improved flexibility delivered by the Smoothwall solution will also enable money-saving services, such as VOIP, to be introduced in the future and achieve even greater value from the implementation.

"We view IT, Wi-Fi and Connectivity as the three pillars underpinning effective service delivery and this implementation supports that ambition. Softcat's involvement in the project was critical to its success and has boosted our capacity to maintain the highest levels of service," said Michael. "Securing beneficial financing agreements is often a barrier within the sector and the deal it arranged and the discount it negotiated on our behalf was amazing, really!"

Benefits at a glance

- Enhanced threat protection and network security
- Flexible filtering for improved access to appropriate resources
- Significant discount and beneficial financing agreement secured

Why Softcat?

According to Michael, Softcat's commitment to working closely with USP to provide solutions meeting its exact requirements is what sets it apart from other providers. "We like the way Softcat works. When it commits to a project, it does so as a strategic partner, not just a box shifter. It adds value and builds strong, collaborative relationships, which is exactly what we need. It's been a rock-solid partner since before I joined USP and it's a productive relationship we expect to continue for the long term. Softcat has never let us down, is more than happy to go the extra mile when needed and with this solution it has really given us something to shout about."