

NEW WIRELESS A SOUND INVESTMENT

Networking & security



Professional services



The Nottingham is a mutual building society, with branches throughout Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and South Yorkshire, many of which also offer estate agency services. Since 1849, they have offered their customers financial services at every stage of their lives to make sure they have a secure home and financial future. As a mutual building society, they believe in putting people before profits – in everything they do. The Nottingham is the UK's ninth largest building society employing more than 450 people and lending over £500m in mortgages.

The Challenge

When The Nottingham decided to move the premises of its head office, it was afforded a great opportunity to rethink how it delivered much of its IT. What's more, the fact that the new headquarters were to be built from scratch, meant any new IT could literally be integrated into the fabric of the new building.

As their long-term IT partner, Softcat was given the mandate to provide recommendations on what services could be improved as part of the office move. Having seen the challenges, The Nottingham had previously experienced with its wireless guest network this was one area Softcat felt strongly could be massively improved as part of the move.

James Baxter, Senior Account Manager at Softcat explains, "We had seen the frustrations they had experienced with Wi-Fi at the original premises. The solution was really a residential grade set-up which suffered from poor reliability, latency and interference from other networks in close proximity. It meant that it could only be used by a limited number of users and, put simply, was not fit for purpose,"

The Solution

The Nottingham agreed with Softcat's proposal to upgrade the wireless network as it fitted perfectly with their plans to improve the working environment at the new office. Not only would it enable visitors to more freely use and access computer services, but staff would also be able to connect their personal devices to the internet whilst at work. It was hoped this would be seen by staff as a positive gesture by the business.

Ken Johnson, Senior IT Security Analyst at The Nottingham picks up the story, "Whilst only a small part of the IT work that Softcat undertook to help us move, we felt that upgrading the wireless network would add significantly to staff welfare and the feeling of a progressive place to work, as at the last site wireless was not available to staff. Whilst upgrading the wireless network was not driven by a desire to enable a bring-your-own device strategy, we did feel it would give us a solid platform to go in this direction, should we choose to in the future."

In the first instance, however, the new wireless network would be kept very separate from the corporate network and be focused on connecting only personal devices belonging to staff and visitors – not corporate devices. As such there would be no access to corporate systems or data.

Because of the experiences with the original Wi-Fi solution the priorities for the new network were defined by coverage and throughput. The Nottingham needed to ensure they could have a lot of users attached to the network at any one time whilst not compromising on performance or reliability. Furthermore, the ability to secure the network to a granular level was critical.

Initially, Softcat gave The Nottingham a flavour of the types of solution possible based on the budget they had available and their objectives. "We recommended Meraki as it doesn't require a physical controller to manage the wireless access points. This means zero-touch management through a web interface, making for a simple yet cost effective solution. Also being a cloud based solution there is a lot of redundancy, fewer devices to manage in the data centre and strong SLAs built into the service giving substantial peace of mind," says James Baxter.

The Nottingham liked what they heard and following an online demonstration believed this was the solution they were looking for.

To really understand the number of access points needed to achieve the coverage The Nottingham required, Softcat proposed that a site survey was undertaken. Working closely with Meraki, a thorough audit of the new building was undertaken to reveal everything necessary to create a comprehensive blueprint for the solution.

Following the site survey, it was established that 15 wireless access points would be needed. As a cloud-based solution, Meraki requires little in the way of implementation, but the set-up that was required was undertaken jointly by Softcat, Meraki and The Nottingham. This gave the IT team at The Nottingham first-hand insight into the technology and how to use it, particularly the network administration and configuration tools.

The Benefits

The project took place over the course of two months, in part deployed in stages as the fabric of the new building developed. Indeed, the new wireless network was one of the first IT features of the new office and was installed and live even before the new communications room. The Nottingham now supports up to 250 users on the network daily.

Importantly, the solution has more than delivered on their expectations around security according to Ken Johnson, "We wanted the ability to restrict content and limit what people were actually able to browse. We also needed to tie down different types of device including tablets and smartphones based on policies we set. We now have policies for those devices the moment they join our network. We even block our own corporate devices from the network so we can keep things completely separate. It really is very flexible and something we have found very useful."

Whilst The Nottingham was not initially looking for a cloud-based solution there have been other unexpected benefits too, as Ken Johnson explains. "The SLA's on the solution from Meraki were compelling, but you never quite know how this is going to be in reality until you are using the solution. I can honestly say it's been extraordinarily easy to manage. One year into a three year contract and we have not had to flag one support issue. The solution really is about 'set and forget' – it just does what it's supposed to."

Why Softcat?

Ken Johnson continues, "Meraki was a relatively new solution to the UK. We would not have even known about them were it not for Softcat. It's this kind of input that we really value. Softcat knows our business and understood our challenge. Matching the two together they felt we should take a look at Meraki and I am glad we did."

Summary

With robust security measures in place, plus the latest traffic shaping technology deployed, there is little more The Nottingham feels they now need to do with the solution – at least for the foreseeable future. "As we've come to expect with Softcat, the solution went in with minimal fuss, delivering the access we demanded to provide this valuable service to staff and visitors alike," attests Ken Johnson.

Key Facts

- UK's ninth largest building society
- Established 1849
- 450 staff
- In excess of £500m mortgage lending

Critical Success Factors

- Reliable site-wide wireless at new HQ
- Support for up to 250 users
- Robust security provision

Solution Highlights

- Comprehensive site survey to build solution blue print
- Cloud-based wireless network from Meraki

At a Glance

- Zero-touch management
- Minimal hardware – only 15 wireless access points
- Policy driven, flexible security
- No faults reported in over a year