



INFRASTRUCTURE

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council



Microsoft Systems Management Server 2003 has provided Stockport Council with a vastly improved network management capability and enabled the council to simplify rollout of new applications across the network, while reducing the overall support costs

Stockport Council is a large local authority in the North West of England, delivering services to a population of around 300,000 people and 16,000 businesses across an area stretching from the borders of the Peak District National Park to Manchester.

The Central Support Desk of Stockport Council provides the majority of the IT support services required to maintain the council's 2,500 PCs and 60 servers. As these systems are spread over more than 30 separate sites it can be difficult, time consuming and costly to deliver high quality support services, especially to business users on remote sites.

Of the 15,000 calls received by the Central Support Desk each year, a significant proportion require a site visit from a technician to install new software, troubleshoot a problem or reconfigure system settings. These visits are not only a drain on the help desk resources but can also lead to longer fix times as skilled desktop support staff are not always available on every site.

The Central Support Desk asked Phoenix to demonstrate the capabilities of Microsoft's latest network management utility, Systems Management Server 2003, to ensure it would deliver

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the necessary improvements in working practices and business efficiency. The key requirements for the new network management system were as follows:

- The system must be quick and easy to deploy across the network to various different versions of Windows (98, NT4, 2000 and XP)
- Remote desktop control must be available in a number of different modes including view only, shared control and full remote control
- Software distribution of packaged applications must be available on a machine-specific basis or by logical groupings of PCs
- Comprehensive hardware and software audits are required to deliver accurate asset management information and to track and monitor desktop hardware and installed applications
- Management information should be available through a range of standard reports, with the option to customise reports to meet specific requirements

THE SOLUTION

The network at Stockport Council is based primarily on Windows 2000 and Active Directory, so Microsoft SMS was the natural choice for delivering the required network management capabilities while integrating with the existing network infrastructure. As SMS 2003 was due for release, the council decided that a thorough evaluation of the final Release Candidate software would establish the suitability of the final release software, with the live rollout timed to coincide with the full release of SMS 2003.

The required functionality was to be delivered by a combination of the base SMS client and several additional agents, including Remote Control, Advertised Programs and Hardware/Software Inventory. Any additional features could then be added through the deployment of supplementary agents at a later date.

THE PROOF-OF-CONCEPT

For the project to be successful, it was essential that a thorough proof-of-concept exercise was carried out to ensure that SMS 2003 could deliver the necessary services across the range of network clients.

Working in partnership with the Central Support Desk, Phoenix developed a test lab environment to demonstrate the capabilities of SMS 2003. A Windows 2003 server was configured with SMS 2003 and SQL 2000 and connected to a small test network consisting of sample client machines that had been installed with the council's standard builds of Windows 98, NT4, 2000 and XP.

The SMS client discovery options were then tested successfully, with client machines located via the network discovery tool as well as the Active Directory discovery method. The base SMS client was then pushed out to these PCs, with the legacy client used for Windows 98 and NT4 and the advanced client deployed to the Windows 2000 and XP systems. With the base SMS client correctly installed, the additional agents for remote control, application deployment and hardware/software inventory were distributed to the test PCs.

All the required features were successfully demonstrated in the test lab environment and the full rollout was given the green light, with live deployment planned to coincide with the full release of SMS 2003. The proof-of-concept exercise took a week to complete, with the test lab left available to Stockport's staff for further familiarisation before the rollout to the live network.

THE FULL ROLLOUT

The final version of SMS 2003 was released by Microsoft in December 2003, allowing the live deployment to begin. A new production-quality server was commissioned and installed with Windows 2003, SMS 2003 and SQL 2000 to provide a solid platform for the network-wide installation.

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A phased approach was taken to ensure the software rollout remained tightly controlled and to minimise the risk of any unforeseen problems. The IT Department was chosen as the first 'pilot' group, with around 80 PCs installed with the base SMS client along with the remote control and hardware/software inventory agents. The pilot group deployment was completed in less than three days, with the council's own IT team spending the next week testing and validating the configuration, before the phased rollou continued with other key departments at the Town Hall complex.

With the SMS installations for the Town Hall complex PCs completed, the rollout to remote sites was performed on a persubnet basis, allowing each remote site to be targeted with the required SMS client and agents. As the majority of the council's remote sites were all connected over 10Mb LAN extensions the rollout progressed smoothly as problems with limited bandwidth were not experienced.

THE BENEFITS

The SMS 2003 project at Stockport Council was completed successfully and within budget, enabling the council to

benefit from a range of advanced network management features.

Remote control capabilities allow support staff to shadow network users' desktop sessions, observe problems and offer advice to end users. Where necessary, the support team can also take control of the PC to perform advanced troubleshooting or system configuration changes. This remote control capability has dramatically reduced the need for support staff to undertake site visits to fix minor issues, enabling the help desk resources to be deployed more efficiently.

Inventory and asset management agents provide the council with a method for tracking hardware and software assets across the organisation, delivering detailed reports to the management team.

The software distribution features have been fully tested and will be implemented on the live network shortly, allowing the targeted deployment of new applications, upgrades and patches.

Overall, Stockport Council is pleased with the increased control, change configuration and management information offered by SMS 2003.

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