MANAGING DATA SECURELY

SECURITY SHELTER

MUIR HOUSING GROUP ASSOCIATION BEEFS UP THE SECURITY OF ITS REMOTE NETWORK

Muir Housing Group Association needed to beef up the security of its remote network for employees and contractors using diverse technology platforms. It turned to MTI, a long-standing security partner, for its consulting expertise, which in turn enabled the delivery of a cloud-based managed service. This consisted of different, easy-to-use two-factor authentication methods under one contract, reflecting the complex needs of the housing association.

Muir Group Housing Association (MGHA) was originally established in 1968 and formally registered as a housing association in 1976. It manages 5,000 properties and aims to meet a wide range of needs, from providing homes for those who can't afford mainstream property prices, to offering sheltered and supported accommodation for vulnerable people, often with acute needs.

It also has a charitable subsidiary called Friends of Muir Group. Like many similar housing associations today, MGHA's remit extends beyond providing housing alone and some of its activities and initiatives are designed to deliver community support at the point where statutory services tail off.

AT A GLANCE

Industry
Public sector

The challenge
Muir Group Housing Association required two-factor authentication platform to strengthen remote network access. However, it had four different user groups requiring remote access to the network. This potentially made a solution complex, difficult to manage and costly.

The solution
The housing association consulted with MTI, who proposed a cloud-based, managed service that provided different secure remote access methods, such as an app on mobile devices to generate secure IDs, tokens, and a website for pre-registered third parties. Importantly, the network access gateway is the same whichever access method is used. Together, this ensured simple but secure remote access and at a low-cost.

Benefits
- Expert consulting insight
- Robust, secure and flexible two-factor authentication for different user groups
- Same network access gateway to reduce complexity
- Cost-effective service from the cloud
- Intuitive and easy-to-use for end users

MGHA had previously used single-factor authentication for remote network access but this was no longer considered good enough. Ian Whitwell, Head of ICT, MGHA, explains: "In the office, a user account and password is sufficient but it's clearly not enough for mobile access. Given the housing association's steady growth and an increased need for secure remote network access, we wanted to introduce two-factor authentication to provide a more rigorous standard."

However, MGHA was concerned about the expense and complexity of introducing a two-factor authentication solution, given that it had four different users groups with remote access needs; employees working from home, mobile workers who needed occasional access, its IT team and third parties. It believed that such a solution would be both costly and complex to manage.

THE SOLUTION

MGHA had an existing three-year relationship with MTI, a global solutions and services provider. MTI was set to carry out a penetration testing exercise on MGHA's networks. As such, Ian Whitwell requested a consultancy overview from MTI for two factor solutions ahead of the penetration testing, as well as looking at options from a number of other providers.

MGHA had laid out a number of criteria; a cloud-based technology delivered as a managed service able to meet different access needs and at a price that would meet tight budget requirements.

MTI proposed a two-factor authentication platform from Signify, a cloud-hosted managed service that incorporates best-of-breed technologies from vendors such as RSA. The platform offered different secure access methods, across different platforms and through the same gateway.

For example, the majority of its home workers used Apple devices. The Signify solution allowed them to access the MGHA network via Citrix through an app on their devices. The app simply generates a secure ID to access the network. Mobile workers who need occasional access to the network had the choice of having an app installed on their iPhones or using a token.

The IT team needed remote VPN and Citrix access and were also provided with an external app that generates a secure ID. For third-parties a website was provided. They pre-registered their details and when they required access to the network they simply entered their ID details to receive a secure ID.

Ian Whitwell said: "The users groups have different access methods but importantly, which ever method they use, the access gateway is the same. This make it's a simple but robust and secure platform."

> **"The range of two-factor authentication access options is certainly impressive. Complexity is swept away because the access gateway is the same whichever access method is used. And importantly they are all easy and intuitive to use, making it a simple but robust solution."**
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> **Ian Whitwell, Head of ICT,**
> **Muir Group**
> **Housing Association**

BUSINESS BENEFITS

SINGLE COST-EFFECTIVE CONTRACT

Despite the different authentication methods and varied user groups the service comes under one contract. Ian Whitwell explains: "Because it's a cloud-based service, we don't have any hardware and software costs. Some of the options we looked at required us to install servers in-house. This sent the costs skyrocketing. However, this solution meets all the different access requirements we have and at a cost that is certainly manageable."

PROTECTION AND COMPLIANCE

By introducing two-factor authentication MGHA has bolstered its security without adding complexity or punitive costs. "As a housing association, we hold a lot of sensitive data about our residents. Protecting them and meeting data protection requirements is extremely important. But that said, employees need to be able to access information remotely. We are now able to do that in a simple and cost-effective manner, without compromising on security," said Ian Whitwell.

MEETING ALL ACCESS NEEDS

Ahead of the search for two-factor authentication, Ian Whitwell's main concern was finding a solution that would meet the access needs of its four user groups without introducing enormous complexity. Alongside the app-generated secure ID, physical tokens and website-based secure access, SMS On-Demand can also be used. "The range of two-factor authentication access options is certainly impressive. Complexity is swept away because the access gateway is the same whichever access method is used. Importantly, they are all easy and intuitive to use, making it a simple but robust solution," adds Ian Whitwell.

PROFESSIONAL, EXPERT ADVICE

The professional and impartial advice from MTI underpins the managed service received by MGHA and is an element of the relationship that is highly valued by Ian Whitwell. He says: "MTI don't try and push a particular vendor technology. They focus on our needs and use this to make informed decisions about the best technology fit. We have a good, strong and transparent relationship with our MTI account manager. Every time we have engaged with the company they have provided excellent and impartial advice."

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