Shropshire County PCT

When Shropshire County PCT's headquarters moved to the William Farr House site in Shrewsbury 20 years ago, it was cost-effective for it to become a satellite of the acute trust's telephone system. The PCT had its own switchboard but it was linked to the hospital switchboard.

Problems with the old system

The old system "was creaking a little", says Gary Turner, Shropshire PCT's assistant director of finance for Family Health Services. There had been little investment over the years and parts were difficult to get hold of.

The PCT paid a monthly rental for the equipment and paid for calls made from its site. Although the acute trust was only across the road, it was a different NHS organisation and the PCT had to put in a request if it wanted to make any changes to the telephone system.

"We were in their hands as to when that happened, at what pace [and] at what cost," says Mr Turner. "We weren't in control of our own destiny."

Taking control

The PCT decided it wanted to control its telephone system on the headquarters site, which consisted of one large main HQ building and nine smaller blocks. It was a large site with 410 telephone extensions so the changeover to a more modern system would be a large project.

After speaking to a number of suppliers, including the previous one, the PCT board chose an NEC telephone system. Cost was a big player in the decision. Mr Turner says: "We're a public sector organisation so the cost was a priority."

Another deciding factor was the flexibility of the NEC system. When changing to a new system, the PCT could opt for full internet protocol (IP) technology, or it could install standard telephones and use the existing infrastructure and telephony cables around the building. The latter would avoid re-cabling the building, which would have been expensive due to its size.

The PCT wanted a system which allowed for both options and decided to implement the NEC system using its existing telephone cables. But the option was there to upgrade to full IP if and when it wanted to.

Easy to operate

In addition to its flexibility, the NEC system was attractive because it was easy to operate. The PCT decided that all 410 users would get the same handset. It meant that if people changed offices, they would continue to use the same technology.

With the previous system, some 10 different handsets were used. "Depending on where you were in the

organisation you had a bigger handset that had more functionality," says Mr Turner. "We took the decision that that was awkward, it was difficult to replace [and] it was difficult to maintain."

Purchasing 410 identical handsets was also cost-effective and staff needed training to use just one piece of technology. Prior to the installation, an engineer from WT Communications ran training sessions on how to use the new handset. A training suite with about 20 extensions was set up and people could try out various functions like answering a call, transferring a call and making a conference call.

Staff received a mini user guide which described how to access services like voicemail and remote voicemail. And a helpline was set up for around four weeks so that anyone who had a problem with their phone could dial 5000 and leave a message. The engineers could dial in remotely to the voicemail box, then visit the staff member to go through the issue. Mr Turner says: "That's how we resolved a lot of the issues, it was very much one to one."

Smooth installation

Despite the size of the installation, due to meticulous planning the implementation of 410 extensions went seamlessly. Mr Turner says: "We couldn't have hoped for a better installation."

As part of the preparation, infrastructure for the new system was installed into the telecoms room. When that was ready, engineers from WT Communications went around, block by block, and changed over the extensions.

The smaller blocks were done first, often at the end of a working day. Engineers came in, stripped out the old extensions and put the new ones in. Installation in the biggest building, which houses some 200 staff, was done on a Friday evening and over a weekend.

"We've had absolutely no down time at all, which I think is remarkable for a change of this size," says Mr Turner. "People left their desks with [an old] handset on Friday evening, they walked in Monday morning and it was an NEC handset and they could still do their business."

Capitalising on the benefits

The PCT now has control over any changes it would like to make to the system. In the past it had to ask the acute trust's permission for even minor changes like moving an employee's telephone line to a different room. The acute trust would plan the move and liaise with the engineers to get the job done.

Today the PCT can work directly with the engineers for such changes. It also has access to certain parts of the system so that it can make some alterations – for example adding a new employee or changing an employee's name - itself.

The NEC system also provides management information that was previously unavailable to the PCT. "[On] a large site like this we need to monitor call costs – we're a public sector organisation, we've got to keep costs down," says Mr Turner. "That was very difficult on the old system. What I'd get every month was a huge printout of what calls had been made from what extensions on this site."

There is no need for printouts with the new system. He has access to a PC where all of the information is stored and can look at it on screen. It enables him to find who made a call, at what time and from what extension, plus what calls came into the building.

Previously if the PCT observed that it took a lot of calls, there was no accurate figure of how many. "Now we've got that information at our finger tips," says Mr

Turner. The system shows how many calls are coming in as they're happening, how many calls are going out, and how many calls have been abandoned.

Free link to the acute trust

WT Communications worked with NEC to create a link which allows PCT staff to call the acute trust for free. There is a lot of telephone traffic between the two organisations, with finance staff in regular communication and commissioners also making frequent calls to plan services. The link with the acute trust is saving the PCT approximately £225 per month.

Mr Turner says: "If we had implemented our NEC system completely standalone, those calls would have cost us because we would have had to call an exchange line, so we agreed a link with the hospital."

Keys to success

Communication with staff is one of the keys to success for installation of this size, says Mr Turner. The PCT gave staff plenty of notice of handset transfer dates via the intranet and warned them that their telephone numbers would change so that they could inform colleagues.

Choosing the right partner for the installation was also important. WT Communications planned and documented everything very thoroughly and was available for a number of weeks afterwards to help staff and make sure the PCT could carry on with its business.

"People like the system," says Mr Turner. "It's easy to use, it's simple, but it allows them to do more than they could before."

He adds: "The training and support offered by our supplier, WT Communications, was excellent and means that the PCT can get the most from the system."

Benefits of the new NEC system:

- The PCT now has many more direct dial extensions so customers can dial the person they require at the PCT direct and this also frees up time for the switchboard to deal with more complex calls.

- The PCT now has more incoming lines into the site meaning that all calls can get through.

- Callers now have the ability to leave a voicemail message on any extension when the person is away from their desk. These messages can be picked up from the extension or remotely by dialling into the system when off-site.

- Pick-up groups have been established to enable staff to pick up calls from other extensions within their department.

- The NEC handsets are user friendly and every member of staff on the site has the same handset.

- The system has different levels of functionality dependent upon the individual using the handset.

- The system now employs Caller ID so staff now who is calling them or has called them.

- The system has department and pick-up groups so that calls can be directed at a group of people in a department and the system is able to stagger calls ensuring that calls are distributed into a department evenly.