Managed solution keeps essential government services online

TLScontact works with governments around the world, providing secure processing for visa and passport applications as well as other citizen services. For the UK Government the organisation provides a hosted ‘always-on’ portal for civilians around the world to access UK visa services via a cloud solution fully managed and supported by Jisc.

TLScontact is a long-standing Jisc cloud services customer. A couple of years ago Jisc moved TLScontact’s fully managed solution out of our datacentre into AWS, which was identified as the most appropriate cloud solution to manage the organisation’s huge database. Jisc have continued to manage it for TLScontact since.

“We need a managed service to make sure there’s sufficient bandwidth and there’s always support available if our site has to come offline for urgent changes to be made,” says Russell Stynes, procurement & strategic partner manager at TLScontact.

“This can happen at short notice at any time of the day, especially when there are legislation or policy changes, for example during the Brexit process. With Jisc we always have numerous people available on call, including engineers. If we did the work in-house there would be times when we couldn’t allocate enough resource because of other work deadlines.”

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Late in 2019 Jisc needed to migrate the portal to new servers to ensure continuing technical support from Microsoft and the application development partner Lokulus wanted to use the opportunity to build a new version of the app to improve functionality for end users. A key project deliverable was that the UK Government’s service must be offline for as short a time as possible. “Someone, somewhere, always needs to use the portal,” says Russell Stynes.

The project therefore had to be planned and executed meticulously. Each stakeholder – the Home Office, TLScontact, Lokulus and Jisc – appointed a project manager to oversee progress, with weekly group calls to review and plan work.

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The project took three months. Jisc designed and built the infrastructure and set up test environments for Lokulus to migrate their data and test the application. Initially the data migration was proving very slow, so Jisc helped out by profiling the database servers and found the data was being stored in a general purpose storage tier.

Lokulus took the lead for the final changeover. "We'd already built the infrastructure, so our work was largely done," says Peter. "But we provided support, taking the site down quickly when minor coding glitches needed rectification, and then getting it back online without delay." The changeover took just 35 hours over a single weekend.

Why does TLScontact work with Jisc cloud services?

"We've worked with Jisc for years and we continue to work with them because they get things done. It means we can focus on what we need to do to provide our own client, the UK Government, with a great service," says Russell Stynes.

"When we send Jisc a request for something to be done, it is dealt with instantly. And they send us a monthly report, showing what they've done and every single month they include ideas to make things better. The quality they provide is second to none. I've never known a supplier be so proactive in suggesting better practice or a solution that leads to direct cost benefits."

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"The database is huge. The sheer volume of data was causing problems because the nature of the data meant it had to be processed in strict sequence; this was causing a bottleneck. We tweaked the infrastructure and resolved the issue by increasing the storage performance so data could flow in much more rapidly."

Peter Cliff

Jisc worked with Lokulus throughout their data migration and initial testing to iron out any connectivity and firewall issues before TLScontact and the Home Office put the system through its paces. Throughout the production, test and acceptance testing stages Jisc kept the original servers running, putting in a temporary proxy box to make sure normal services were uninterrupted.

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To find out how Jisc can support your organisation please contact:
customer.support@jisc.ac.uk
or visit jisc.ac.uk/customers

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