NCG: “The hardest part of implementing session border controller was scheduling it for when students were on holiday”

NCG has seven colleges across England, from Southwark in South London to Carlisle and Newcastle upon Tyne in the north. Between the colleges, they had four legacy phone systems costing hundreds of thousands each year in line rental, call and maintenance charges. Small wonder, then, that they were one of the first to try our new session border controller service to transform their telephony.

**Unifying organisational systems**
NCG also operated several different domains but needed to bring the colleges together under just one. As part of this wider project, they undertook a review in summer 2021, when we told them about the session border controller service we were developing.

“NCG was challenged by time and resources, but it was an organisational priority to unify our systems and to make cost savings,” says Tom Earl, IT contract, budgets and procurement manager at NCG. “We had implemented Microsoft Teams and knew we wanted to migrate all our telephony services into the platform. We decided to work with Jisc once we heard their plans to launch a session border controller service as we knew we’d get value for money.”

**Staged approach**
NCG opted to implement session border controller in stages, to make sure their internal resources weren’t over-stretched. Lewisham and Southwark Colleges were using Skype for Business, a platform that is now in its end-of-life phase, and these were the first colleges chosen for the project.
“We started in May 2021 and needed to finish before both colleges were set to join the new single domain two months later,” says Tom. “Jisc set up the connection, began testing and managed the implementation remotely for both locations. They gave us all the guidance we needed to configure our instance of Teams with the Jisc service, so it all went to plan and was a great experience.”

Phase two happened after students left campus for October half term, with session border controller implemented at three colleges in just one week. These were Carlisle College, Kidderminster College and West Lancashire College. These could have been slightly trickier because staff were using traditional landline systems when on campus; they needed to adapt to using their college computers and headsets instead. Everyone easily rose to the challenge, says Tom:

“Working mostly from home for more than a year had done some of the groundwork for us on this, and we had no issues at all.”

The final two colleges, Newcastle College and Newcastle Sixth Form College, implemented session border controller during the Christmas holiday period.

Tom says:
“The group-wide implementation went smoothly and to plan. There wasn’t any reluctance, in fact, staff are very positive about the change because now everyone has their own work phone number. There’s no phone-sharing so no one waits for a line. It just makes it easier for people to do their job.”

Benefits
Session border controller offers many benefits. They include:

Cost
“Our costs have been cut massively,” says Tom. “We’re saving tens of thousands of pounds a year in line rental, call and maintenance charges alone.”
Before implementation NCG had around 1,500 physical handsets; now, it has just a handful. NCG engineers spend much less time on college premises maintaining handsets and so they have more time and headspace for other tasks.

Universities and colleges can make other big savings because session border controller is a service fully managed by Jisc in the cloud, using Oracle ‘carrier grade’ cloud infrastructure and Gamma voice, connectivity and mobile services – so you don’t have to invest in your own infrastructure or coordinate multiple contracts for the same solution.

**Security**

“Having just one domain and a single communications platform across the group is more efficient and is easier to secure,” says Tom.

The legacy telephony systems were out of software support with the manufacturers and some no longer received security patches, so the new system brings an extra layer of cyber protection to strengthen the group’s security posture. So, too, does reducing the number of people using their own equipment when working from home.

Session border controller uses Oracle technology hosted on the secure Janet Network and it provides a high level of security and resilience. Along with Janet IP connectivity this ensures great call quality.

**Scalability**

“Jisc analysed our voice traffic to work out how many channels we required. This information had been impossible to get out of our previous providers but now we know how many concurrent calls we make, and we only pay for the call volumes we need,” says Tom.

Session border controller is scalable so if your university or college takes on new staff or merges with another organisation, for example, you can add channels easily. This may also be helpful if your organisation expects a sudden surge in call volumes, for example during clearing.

**Session border controller** is a new service for Jisc members, introduced to help you stay ahead of big upcoming changes to the UK’s telephone infrastructure.

If you’d like to learn more, visit the session border controller service page or contact your account manager.