



New England Strategic Alliance of Councils

Customer profile

The New England Strategic Alliance of Councils was formed in 2004 by the Armidale Dumaresq Council, Walcha Council, Guyra Shire Council, Uralla Shire Council and the New England Weeds Authority.

Industry

Local Government

Location

New South Wales, Australia

Solution

Storage management
 Backup
 Server virtualisation and consolidation
 Routing and switching upgrade
 WAN implementation

EMC products

EMC CLARiiON AX100
 4 x VMware ESX Virtual Infrastructure Nodes

Benefits

- Cost savings
- Server consolidation through virtualisation
- Reduced IT effort through centralised management
- Critical data protected
- Easier, more reliable backups



Council Alliance Centralises Storage, Secures Critical Data with EMC CLARiiON AX100

In 2004, the Armidale, Walcha, Guyra and Uralla councils and the New England Weeds Authority in northern New South Wales joined forces to form the New England Strategic Alliance of Councils (NESAC). Looking down the barrel of a forced amalgamation, the councils decided to maintain their independence by developing a shared services model. They hoped this would allow them to reduce costs, increase efficiency, achieve economies of scale and work together to provide better services to customers.

“NESAC services around 50,000 people in an area approximately 200 kilometres long by 150 kilometres wide,” said Robert Fulcher, Secretary of the New England Strategic Alliance of Councils. “In an area this large, moving all councils to one location would inconvenience residents, who would have to drive long distances to perform routine errands such as paying rates or lodging building requests.

“We wanted to keep the local offices open in the towns to maintain the level of service residents expect and to keep employment levels up.”

Shared Services Environment

However, implementing a shared services infrastructure was easier said than done. Each member of the Alliance had varying degrees of locally based technology infrastructure. Server data was kept in internal or direct-attached disk storage, with local tape backups at each site. Each council used different storage management software and had its own local area network and IT team. Consolidating this into one system that could be accessed by all councils was a mammoth undertaking.

While each council’s data needed to be kept separate from the others to ensure the integrity and security of the information, some functions were being centralised to increase efficiency. This meant users responsible for these tasks needed access to certain information in other councils’ databases.

“While we planned to continue to operate as autonomous bodies, we wanted to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale by centralising some core functions such as payroll and HR,” explained Fulcher. “This meant the security settings and policies around data management needed to be quite complex.”

As well as providing a common infrastructure set and application platform to meet the business needs of the new entity, NESAC members realised they would need a datacentre

to provide centralised storage and backup. The Alliance also needed to create a network that could be easily managed and updated by a single IT team.

“Each council needs to store a lot of data,” said Fulcher. “This includes information on properties, rates and billing information and maintenance records. We also need to store business information for the councils, such as payroll, HR and administrative data.”

Centralised Storage with EMC CLARiiON AX100

The council went to tender for a systems integrator that could manage the project. Its list of requirements included:

- Standard application set for all councils
- Adequate computing power to run this software across multiple locations
- Ability for a large number of people to have access to the applications simultaneously
- Ability for applications to communicate – for example, so the financial system can view information in the rates billing system
- High-availability environment
- Central storage and backup facilities.

EMC partner Allcom Networks Pty Ltd (Allcom) won the tender and started work on the project in April 2006. Allcom developed and implemented a single IT platform based on Dell servers and an EMC CLARiiON AX100 networked storage system. The servers and CLARiiON are located in the alliance’s new datacentre in Armidale and run on a combined VMware, Microsoft and Citrix platform.

The councils are linked to each other and the datacentre through a wide area network (WAN) on Telstra communications infrastructure using Cisco networking equipment supplied, installed and supported by Allcom. The new business applications are based on software from Technology One, Extensity (formerly GEAC) and Trim.

The EMC CLARiiON AX100 is a networked storage system specially designed to help small and medium-sized businesses consolidate storage. Easy to install and manage, the CLARiiON AX100 provides a strong, scalable infrastructure on which organisations can build a reliable storage environment.

The Alliance uses EMC SnapView software to take twice-daily snapshots of all data, making it much easier for IT staff to quickly and easily restore accidentally deleted files or to recover data in the event of a disaster or system outage.

In addition, Allcom implemented four VMware Virtual Infrastructure Nodes to consolidate the roles of multiple servers into a much smaller number of physical servers.

“We recommended EMC storage due to the superior features and reliability of the CLARiiON AX100,” explained Philip Steedman, Account Manager at Allcom. “Merging five organisations would create a significant storage requirement and server-based disk storage wasn’t going to cut the mustard.

“NESAC needed some serious storage; something that would help with backups and create a platform they could build on to accommodate future growth.”

“Being based in the country limits our access to expert IT assistance,” said Fulcher. “Allcom had an office in Armidale, ensuring we received the best quality assistance with local

support. We couldn't have achieved what we have without their help and guidance.”

Centralised Data Storage

Centralising the councils' information assets has improved business continuity, flexibility, inter-council collaboration and productivity.

“Users in different locations can now access the same application or set of data simultaneously,” said Fulcher. “This has increased the accuracy and consistency of information. We've also seen a decrease in unplanned downtime, lifting productivity and increasing staff satisfaction with the system.”

By centralising data storage and consolidating on a common IT platform that can be accessed by all councils, NESAC expects to achieve significant cost savings, improve performance management and measurement and streamline processes.

“The shared services solution has revolutionised the way the councils operate separately and as a whole,” said Fulcher. “We could not have achieved such impressive results operating as separate entities. The funds we are saving from this project can be redirected to provide better services for the community.”

Centralised data storage means centralised backup. This has reduced the IT effort required to manage backups and increased data reliability.

“With the CLARiiON AX100, backups have become simple and straightforward. We are now confident in the currency and accuracy of our information assets and our ability to recover these in the event of a disaster or problem.”

– Robert Fulcher, Secretary, New England Strategic Alliance of Councils

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Server Consolidation with VMware

Using VMware virtualisation technology as part of the solution has slashed the number of physical servers NESAC requires to run its applications. The Alliance is now running 30 virtual servers on four physical host machines.

“Server virtualisation and the resulting consolidation will reduce our ongoing hardware costs dramatically,” said Fulcher. “We didn't have the server room space or facilities to support so many physical servers in the one location. Virtualisation has reduced the physical footprint of our server infrastructure. It also makes our environment far more flexible and portable.”

The virtualised storage environment came into its own during the deployment of the shared services solution, allowing the Alliance to rapidly add systems for training and testing as required throughout the implementation.

“Now the system has been moved into production, we can fulfil requests for additional storage when required and allocate server resources dynamically to provide the best fit for business needs,” said Fulcher.

Scalable Solution for Future Growth

The CLARiiON AX100 networked storage system provides a solid base on which NESAC can build to strengthen and extend its storage infrastructure.

“The new solution allows us to take a more professional approach to managing our IT assets,” said Fulcher. “With centralised storage, you can build a solid and reliable infrastructure.”

NESAC can build on the CLARiiON AX100 to implement new functionality such as disaster recovery capabilities. The scalable solution means that as the amount of information the councils need to store grows, their storage infrastructure can scale to meet demand.

“We have every confidence that the EMC storage solution will meet our needs well into the future,” said Fulcher. “We’re looking forward to building on this great start to increase the functionality we can provide to our employees and the improved services we can offer our customers.”

“Combining Allcom’s systems integration expertise with the power of the EMC storage technology allowed us to deliver a superior shared services solution to the Alliance,” said Steedman. “We worked together to design and build a system that will meet NESAC’s unique needs now and into the future.”



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