

**G**as the economy faces its worst downturn in 30 years local authorities are having to think creatively about how to deliver services within budget. Most environmental health chiefs are aware of the cost saving potential offered by mobile working. Some pioneer authorities such as Barnsley MBC have embraced it and are hot desking in paperless offices with officers only required in the department for half a day a week.

Others are more cautious and waiting for a tested technical and administrative infrastructure before venturing into uncharted territory.

### Infrastructure

One company that is looking to provide part of that infrastructure is RH Environmental (RHE), run by Rob Halford, a former EHO who left his job as service manager at the London borough of Ealing in 1997 to live in Wales. In 1999 he set up his environmental health consultancy working on non-traditional areas of environmental health such as sustainability.

Ceredigion County Council contacted RHE last year to help it compile procedures for its environmental protection division. Rather than developing a paper-based system of procedures, letters and forms, the team opted for a web-based alternative. Through the year a centrally updated database took shape, giving EHPs daily access to all the policies, procedures and guidance they need.

The CIEH saw the potential of such a system to meet a growing demand from central government for consistent enforcement and has gone into partnership with RHE. "One of the key attractions for us was the drive coming out of the LBRO for standardisation of enforcement

across local authorities," says Graham Jukes, CIEH chief executive. "Obviously if everyone is operating from the same baseline with the same information and guidance, this is going to be far easier to achieve and is therefore something that we should be supporting."

While the main objective was to achieve consistency, it became clear that delivering web-based data would be of interest to local authorities looking to move to mobile and flexible working practices.

RHE was soon developing a database that would allow managers and staff to access procedures and documents from any location whether at work, hot-desking, working from home or on site. Making the database accessible 24 hours a day meant everything being on hand, even in the event of an out-of-hours emergency.

"We became aware of several agendas facing the regulatory community. There was the Hampton Report and Better Regulation Executive, each calling for more consistency and demanding an increase in flexibility and mobility of services," says Mr Halford.

"There was also a commercial driver for councils to move towards mobile working with practitioners having to clock up significant mileages in dealing with their case loads. If we could provide a service that enabled better consistency and allowed better mobility it was going to be of significant benefit."

Underpinning the environmental health management system is a knowledge base. When RHE started to create the system the team soon faced the same problem as EHPs across the country. They were having to reference hundreds of national policy documents with information



all over cyberspace. Most were difficult and time-consuming to find.

The knowledge base collates important documents from a wide range of reference sources including central government, national agencies and professional institutions. With this RHE created core data sets containing all the information relevant to procedures EHPs are required to perform. It contains all the guidance and relevant legislation since 1988 with live data feeds updating laws as they are published and updated. Data users can customise the system. "When a user logs in, the system recognises which authority they are from and which specific procedures they need," says Mr Halford.

#### Modular structure

The procedures are accessed through modules for each service area (*see box*). The environmental protection module, for example, has procedures covering abandoned mines, smoke nuisances, noise, pollution prevention and control, environmental permitting and contaminated land. The noise data set covers procedures from intruder alarms to construction sites, to raves and wind turbines. The knowledge base contains laws and guidance behind the procedures.

The modular structure of the management system also allows users to incorporate locally relevant data to procedures. "It is not a 'one size fits all'," says Mr Halford. "It can be adapted to each local authority, whether it is a rural unitary county council, a small district council or an urban metropolitan borough. The system content is developed in close co-operation with users to ensure it offers a system tailored to their needs."

Authorities can link generic and standard letters, documents and public information and guidance to procedures. Users are discovering knock-on benefits such as the potential for public information leaflets to be streamed directly from the knowledge base on to council websites.

Huw Williams, assistant director of environmental services for Ceredigion CC, has been testing the system and is linking procedures with his Flare database. "I want my managers to be case managing rather than finding minute changes in guidance and legislation then rewriting procedures," he says. "We need to be task-orientated about dealing with stuff that comes in and this system suits itself to reactive

work and responding consistently to enquiries." He also believes the electronic procedures help protect staff from the Ombudsman: "It makes them feel more secure that they are handling things in a fair and reasonable manner."

Enabling flexible working is also an attraction for Ceredigion. "We have had to think about how we carry on the service if something happens to our building and we have also been developing flexible working so they can access information wherever they are," says Mr Williams.

#### Time saving

Philip Stanton, head of service management for Bridgend DC, is also signing up. He has chosen the environmental protection, food safety and health and safety modules and allocated a dedicated officer to test the system. Next year he will use housing and public health. Web accessibility was a major attraction for him. "We have an out-of-hours team which provides 24/7 cover and they can't carry everything around in a big flight bag so if they have access to everything that we can through the internet with a password then that is as good as it gets."

Another attraction was time saving. "From a management perspective the big deal for us is that someone else is able to look after the difficult process of keeping documents and procedures up to date and making sure all advice and guidance is up to date as well," he says. "Our problem with limited resources is not producing the procedures but keeping them maintained given the wide field that we cover." ■

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#### The modular structure

**EHMS has been designed to allow users to select the modules they require.**

#### The modules available are:

- Animal health
- Environmental crime
- Environmental
- protection
- Food
- Health and safety
- Housing
- Licensing
- Management
- Out of hours
- Pest control
- Port health
- Public health