A major town of nearly 150,000 people, Blackpool is a well-known holiday resort and the third-largest settlement in Northwest England, after Manchester and Liverpool.

Blackpool Council provides network services for most of the state schools and public libraries in the area, as well as for a multitude of its own office sites.

The challenges Blackpool Council faced were threefold: build defenses to combat an increasingly changing threat landscape, drive efficiencies due to school budget cuts, and safeguard citizens under the new Prevent guidelines.

Prevent is one of four strands of the U.K. government’s counterterrorism strategy, known as Contest, first created in 2003, and its remit later widened in 2011. Prevent is designed to support people at risk of joining extremist groups and carrying out terrorist activities, and it requires teachers, faith leaders, doctors, and others to refer any suspicions about people to a local Prevent body. An assessment is then made about whether further action is needed.

Blackpool Council first started working with Fortinet following the Conficker computer worm outbreak in 2009, when Blackpool Council became an early adopter of FortiGate enterprise firewalls at the heart of its infrastructure.

Blackpool Council’s IT service had significant business drivers to develop traded services as a response to budget cuts and austerity, while dealing with evolving threats, and increased compliance and regulatory standards such as those of the Public Services Network (PSN), Payment Card Industry (PCI), General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the National Health Service (NHS) N3 network.

The email threat landscape has since continued to grow at a phenomenal pace, with more than 90% of all emails filtered out as spam. This is in the region of half a million emails per day.

The council is also at the forefront of safeguarding its IT systems, including implementing the Prevent agenda for schools and the wider community.

“Fortinet and TNP have been our network security partners for many years. As the threats have continued to evolve, we have found the Fortinet products have helped us to quickly adapt and meet new challenges. The fact that all Fortinet solutions talk to each other to quickly identify and block an attack saves us significant time and resources, as well as enabling a faster response. This approach is now more important than ever as we increasingly see more sophisticated and automated attacks.”

– Tony Doyle, Head of ICT Services, Blackpool Council

Details
Customer: Blackpool Council
Industry: Government
Location: Blackpool, UK
Building Taller Walls

The council’s cybersecurity concerns came to a head during the Wannacry attack in May 2017.

Fortunately, Blackpool was protected from Wannacry, having invested in the FortiSandbox advanced threat prevention system and intrusion prevention system (IPS) subscriptions, which meant that the signatures of Wannacry were quickly detected and prevented from entering the Blackpool network, while other cyber hygiene was brought up to date.

In addition, the council has recently added the FortiSIEM unified event correlation and risk management solution, so that the team is able to gain greater visibility and proactively respond to any new or emerging threats on the network.

Today, elected members now take an active interest in the council’s cyber defenses, and regular reports are provided by the CIO/SIRO to the council’s audit committee.

Driving Efficiencies in Times of Austerity

Despite a backdrop of austerity across the nation, the council’s IT service has remained viable through traded and managed services, with a significant proportion of income coming from schools.

This was threatened by the emergence of a new academy trust in the region, at a time when many academy trusts elsewhere in the country were migrating away from council provision and building their own infrastructure.

However, the local loop unbundling (LLU) network delivered to schools in Blackpool in conjunction with the council’s network partner, The Networking People, was extremely agile. In order to meet the needs of the largest Multi-Academy Trust in Blackpool using the FortiGate virtual domain object model (VDOM) technology, a new virtual network was able to be rapidly developed and delivered in September 2017.

Not only was this more cost-effective than building separate network infrastructure but it also provided multiple schools within the trust a seamless migration path from the traditional local area network (LAN) onto a new virtual wide-area network (WAN) for the Multi-Academy Trust.

Complying with Prevent

Due to the raised profile of the Prevent agenda, one of Blackpool’s largest schools, built under the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) program, was coming under increased scrutiny to ensure that appropriate safeguarding was in place.

The school faced significant budget challenges with the licensing model of the incumbent filtering solution within the school. They also had concerns that while some filtering was in place on desktop machines, there were ways to potentially bypass the filtering service due to the ingenuity of its pupils.

In response to these challenges, Blackpool Council and its partner, The Networking People, were able to enhance the school’s capabilities in all these areas through utilization of locally based FortiGate enterprise firewalls.

This included proactive alerting of potential child protection and radicalization issues, and also included secure sockets layer (SSL) deep-packet inspection to identify any inappropriate activity via encrypted services. The guest Wi-Fi services were also replaced with personally identifiable information (PII) for all guest users.

Security and compliance continue to increase in complexity with data now traversing way beyond the council’s immediate infrastructure into the cloud, into the home, and onto a multitude of devices.
Blackpool Council is now able to simplify their approach to security and proactively combat security threats across its network, with the Fortinet suite of solutions—including FortiGate, FortiSandbox, and FortiSIEM.

An added benefit of the FortiSIEM solution is that the council now has the increased capability to group all networks and infrastructure devices into a business group, and therefore provide a greater understanding of the business impact on any network, component event, or failure.

Through meeting compliance regimes, greater transparency, and increased responsiveness to new threats, there has been a notable increase in confidence in council meetings.

Fortinet is one of the few vendors that can provide end-to-end solutions to these modern-day challenges of the borderless network. In order to stay relevant as an IT service provider, Blackpool Council now relies on Fortinet as an agile IT partner with the ability to comprehensively meet these challenges.