GreenSquare

Summary

Housing association GreenSquare moves its disaster recovery to Azure Site Recovery in order to deliver a more efficient and less costly IT operation.

Benefits:

- Secondary data centre closed
- Annual DR costs reduced from £100k to £36k
- Recovery Time Objective down to hours from weeks
- Recovery Point Objective reduced from hours to minutes
- Ability to bring up live environment to test application and software upgrades
- Ability to live test whole DR environment
- Internal IT culture changed for better
- Improved business focus

The Challenge

GreenSquare Group is a housing association that builds new homes for rent, shared ownership, and sale in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. It operates in an increasingly competitive and highly regulated sector where the government wants more accommodation built but has mandated that housing associations must reduce their rents by 1%. GreenSquare is therefore under pressure to deliver higher quality yet more affordable housing under a squeezed budget.

"The housing crisis in the UK means we are expected to do more for less," explains Rob Fletcher, Group Head of ICT for GreenSquare. "There are clearly limitations on how much we can do. We realised we couldn't just re-arrange the furniture, so we decided to completely re-orient the ICT strategy around hybrid cloud adoption to control our costs while improving opportunity and choice."

The Approach

A major part of GreenSquare's business rationalisation involved a requirement to relocate it's secondary disaster recovery (DR) data centre. So GreenSquare issued a tender for a new provider for it's DR services.

Six DR providers ended up pitching to GreenSquare. "They were all offering private cloud or colocation," says Rob, "but I just wasn't excited about it. The use of private cloud is less effective and is considerably more expensive than public cloud adoption. Public cloud use is growing and offers so many more features at a better price point, so the more I read the tenders, the more nervous I became. In the end I didn't award the contract. I just felt there was another way forward."

GreenSquare had an existing enterprise agreement with Microsoft for an enterprise deployment of Office 365 so Rob approached them and asked why they hadn't spoken to him about Azure Site Recovery (ASR) and StorSimple. "Microsoft told me I'd been talking to the wrong systems integrators and put me straight in touch with iomart's consultancy team, formerly known as SystemsUp."

The Solution

Our consultants created a Proof of Concept (POC) to show the potential to use ASR as part of GreenSquare's wider Disaster Recovery plans. Rob admits that it was a frustrating process that turned out to be absolutely the right approach. "At times I just wanted them to get on with it but I soon realised that their attention to detail would pay off. The unknown in all this was our infrastructure and how it would integrate with the hybrid model. The team from iomart worked this through in detail which meant that when they started delivering the service, they were bringing in the right skills at the right time. They planned it incredibly thoroughly and there was a huge transfer of knowledge to our engineers on site."

GreenSquare installed a faster 1GB Internet circuit into its Chippenham headquarters, and a redundant backup of 100 MBps, to better accommodate both the ASR replication traffic and the Site-to-Site (S2S) VPN which is required for connectivity between the on-premises network and that in Azure.

Next, GreenSquare deployed a production Active Directory Domain Controller in Azure, to provide local AD DS services to computers in the event that they are failed over to Azure.

After the Azure environment was suitably prepared, ASR was implemented to protect the majority of the on-premises computers into Azure. Subsequently, many failovers have been conducted in order that the GreenSquare IT staff can understand both how ASR operates and also what application level changes are needed after a failover. These failovers have been not only 'test' failovers into an isolated environment in Azure but also 'live' failovers into the Azure network connected by the S2S VPN.

GreenSquare has signed up to a Cloud Transformation Agreement with Microsoft as well as a Server Cloud Enrolment agreement, which helped it access business incentive funding to develop the POC. This includes a StorSimple appliance for local storage purposes.

The Result

The implementation of Azure Site Recovery has led to many benefits for GreenSquare, not least the fact that it no longer needs to maintain a second data centre with all the power, cooling and hardware costs that entails. The annual cost of Disaster Recovery has decreased by almost two thirds – from circa £100,000 to £36,000.

Previously, the Recovery Time Objective (RTO) – the time to recover disabled services - could be up to a fortnight, whereas using ASR has reduced this to hours or even minutes in some cases. Additionally, the Recovery Point Objective (RPO) – data loss in a disaster scenario - has also been significantly reduced – from 24 hours to 15 minutes.

"Although we have a very capable on-site technical resource, this was very much new territory for us," Rob explains. "The consultancy team brought their skills, knowledge and expertise to the table and helped prove to us that ASR would bring GreenSquare sizeable benefits. It was quite a special moment when we went live and realised our vision."

GreenSquare is one of the first housing associations in England to move its Disaster Recovery to the public cloud.

Nick Martin, Director of iomart Consulting, explains, "GreenSquare's Disaster Recovery plan is more secure, more reliable and more predictable as a result of moving to Azure Site Recovery. The automation involved ensures the processes are more repeatable and to a constant standard, which in turn allows them to be much more innovative."

Ultimately the new DR plan means the housing association can get on with building new, much-needed homes to help solve the UK's housing crisis.

"We have continued to develop a range of new homes and achieve high levels of customer satisfaction, all while reducing our ICT infrastructure costs and increasing our business resilience," Rob Fletcher concludes. "We've done that by using public cloud to empower our organisation and our people, and establish our credentials as a housing association that's really leading the way through digital transformation."

About GreenSquare

GreenSquare Group develops a range of new homes – for rent, shared ownership, and sale – and provides housing management, care and support, and commercial property services across Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. The Group manages over 11,500 properties and employs over 500 members of staff. For more information visit www.greensquaregroup.com

About iomart

iomart's consulting team delivers digital and technology transformation projects, helping organisations in the public and private sector with cloud strategy, user experience, application optimisation and cloud enablement. Their expert skill-set also includes post-project technical support. Find out more at www.iomart.com/consultancy/

Microsoft Partner

Application Development
Cloud Platform
Cloud Productivity
Collaboration and Content
Datacenter
Messaging
Windows and Devices
Data Analytics

Microsoft

Microsoft
Tier-1 Cloud Solutions Provider