



SUPPORTING THE MET OFFICE – WHATEVER THE WEATHER

Come rain or shine, G4S is there to enhance the business of an agency that plays a vital role around the world

FEW PEOPLE REALISE that the Meteorological Office – known to everyone as the Met Office – is an executive agency of the UK Ministry of Defence.

For those of us in Britain, it does its duty well when it advises us of imminent rain or snow showers, exceptionally high temperatures and the need for sun block, or the danger of flooding.

The reality, however, is that the Met Office's influence and responsibilities extend far beyond the British Isles and have an important bearing on vital civil and military operations.

Airlines around the world rely on its data when calculating their routes; commanders depend on its forecasts when planning exercises or actions; and scientists debating the planet's changing climate study its historical records for clues about the causes. If the Met Office's assets and facilities are not available 24 hours a day, delivery of these vital critical services can be severely impacted.

Playing a vital role in ensuring that the facilities are available at all times and working at their best is a 100-strong G4S team. →





G4S Integrated Services specialises in the provision of facilities management (FM) in secure and critical environments that require the highest standards of governance and service performance.

G4S is contracted to national and local government agencies – like the Met Office and GCHQ, the nation's communications headquarters at Cheltenham – and to major private sector organisations. Its role, very simply, is to ensure the smooth running of the organisations they are supporting.

"We manage and maintain all of the Met Office support infrastructure and services," Peter Tierney, G4S Integrated Services' director of services for the Met Office, explains. "In fact, it's only manned security and the duties that go with it that we don't do, but our receptionists work very closely with the Met Office security team. We issue passes and support their vetting office."

G4S FM, the description that is used to encompass its extensive range of facilities services and capabilities, is something the company does rather well – as demonstrated particularly in its successes in the Public Private Partnership (PPP) and Private Finance Initiative (PFI) arena.

Indeed, Chris Elliott, group managing director of G4S Integrated Services (UK and Ireland) is also the G4S global product champion for PFI and PPP, providing guidance and support to all G4S businesses on major FM projects worldwide.

The many and varied duties of the G4S FM team at the Met Office may not seem critical to the national infrastructure but G4S provides an integrated, discrete, end-to-end solution that ensures the Met Office experts can focus on delivering their critical services without the hassle of managing numerous subcontractors to maintain and operate their facilities and grounds. They know that their building is safe in the hands of trusted and vetted G4S staff, and a business partner which understands secure environments.

The G4S FM services provided to the Met Office – all 17 of them – are categorised as "hard" (including engineering, planned and preventative maintenance, project work, support services and workspace

re-engineering) and "soft", which are too numerous to list but are essentially "customer interfacing", such as reception, help desk, conference and events management, mail service and waste management.

The team is also responsible for managing grounds maintenance, window cleaning and catering. The customer accesses services through a help desk, providing a single point of contact for all service requests and queries.

The G4S involvement with the Met Office dates back to June 2001 when the Stratus consortium, which it led, won a 15-year, £150 million design-build-operate contract for a new headquarters to be built on the outskirts of Exeter. Previously, the Met Office had operated from Bracknell, Berkshire, and various other locations.

By April 2002, whilst the building was still under construction, Peter Tierney took up his role, working with other Stratus members and the Met Office as a member of the transition team.

This was a major exercise, not least because the Met Office needed to continue operating on a 24-hour, 365-day basis throughout the relocation. A robust plan built around phased delivery ensured this was achieved successfully. By December 2003, 1,150 Met Office staff and a massive amount of technology – some of the most sophisticated scientific equipment in the world – had descended on Devon in one of Europe's largest IT relocation exercises.

The heaviest object was its four-tonne weather radar system. Two massive Cray supercomputers had to be installed before the building was completed and were supplemented in 2004 by an NEC supercomputer that had six times the power of the Crays.

But even that isn't enough number crunching for the Met Office. It took delivery last year of a giant IBM machine that occupies the space of two football pitches and has 30 times more computing power than its previous systems. Already fully operational, the new supercomputer will achieve peak performance next year when it will do the work of 100,000 PCs, making 1,000 billion calculations every second.

John Hirst, Met Office chief executive, explained: "In a world where the effect of extreme weather events is becoming more severe and the potential impact of global warming is becoming ever more apparent, the Met Office plays an increasingly vital role in researching and forecasting these events."

Ironically, the power needed to run such massive computers also produces 12,000 tonnes of CO₂ →



emissions each year. However, this is more than compensated for by its benefits.

As one of only two World Area Forecast Centres for Civil Aviation, the Met office operates its own satellite-based broadcasting system to distribute real-time weather data to airports all over the world, without which planes cannot take off. It has also launched ClearFlight, an online, global briefing service that makes its weather information easier to access and interpret.

So, though it has to create emissions to compute this information, its forecasts save close to three million tonnes of CO₂ emissions a year by improving efficiency for European flights alone. Its benefits extend much further because airlines throughout the world are able to use its global aviation forecasts to save fuel by using the wind to help them to their destination. That increased efficiency saves a further 20 million tonnes of CO₂ annually.

Although 90 per cent of the Met Office's energy consumption is attributable to the computers, Tierney's G4S FM team is always looking for savings and business improvements in other areas. More energy-efficient internal and external lights have been installed and by keeping a closer watch on when lights come on they have reduced power costs.

As well as being praised by the Met Office for the work they do and the way in which they have integrated so well with its staff, the team has also received the personal congratulations of Britain's prime minister Gordon Brown.

These arrived following last year's announcement that G4S Integrated Services had become the first commercial company to be awarded the prestigious UK Government Customer Service Excellence standard (formerly known as the Charter Mark) for its

Met Office contract.

Commenting on the award, Jonathon Face, the G4S customer services manager for the contract, says: "We try to understand and gain an insight into all the customer's business requirements and then meet or exceed them.

"Our staff go through three levels of customer service training. They also undergo cross training to learn how to carry out roles in other areas, to give them a holistic view of what we're doing here."

Among the other standards the team has achieved and awards it has won is the British Safety Council 5 Star Award for their health and safety practices, winning the coveted Sword of Honour twice.

One way to see how efficiently the team works is when the weather turns bad. In February this year the Met Office put out a severe weather warning for its own area and then had to cope with up to 12 inches of snow which left 200 cars and their occupants stranded nearby.

"My team coped extremely well with it," says Peter Tierney. "Our contingency plan swung into place and we were able to work together to ensure the safety of our staff working on site and travelling to and from it, using our local knowledge and the data that came from the Met Office.

"More importantly, our efforts ensured that the Met Office was able to continue delivering its world-wide services without any interruptions." ■

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