

Special delivery – BFPO ups frontline game

Systems which will improve postal services to deployed UK servicemen and women are being introduced across Afghanistan by a team from DE&S' British Forces Post Office.

Men and women on the front line of Afghanistan are enjoying enhanced services thanks to new information systems brought in by British Forces Post Office.

The services will also increase visibility of the end-to-end mail chain and automate complicated manual processes.

The three new systems are e-bluey 2, Horizon Online (HoL) and Postal and Courier Electronic Records (Pacer) 2.

A team from BFPO's Technical Support Services (TSS) – Maj Mark Lloyd, WO2 Mark Gwilt, Sgt Russel Gibbons and Sgt Stuart Paton – were tasked with implementing e-bluey 2 in Afghanistan before the existing service ceased to function.

E-bluey has been in service since 2001 and, with monthly downloads averaging between 55,000 and 100,000, it is extremely popular. The existing contract,

which has already been extended three times, ceased at the end of last December. The project team has been working on its replacement.

While some of the work could be done remotely, much of the work, including the technical refresh of hardware, could only be completed in theatre once Boeing Defence (UK) had installed and configured the new servers and made the production environment accessible.

The TSS team from BFPO's headquarters at RAF Northolt deployed to upgrade the existing e-bluey system used throughout theatre. Team members also installed and configured Pacer 2 for use at the Camp Bastion post office. They encountered a number of issues but, as they deployed with the right experts and were appropriately supported by those at RAF Northolt, they managed to complete all their tasks.

The team also trained up the local e-bluey SNCO, visited forward bases to rectify equipment issues and lack of training, carried out site surveys, refurbished holdings, submitted 'request for change' for systems, prepared for later installation of HoL and also helped in sorting some of the 2012 Christmas mail!



Message from home: Sgt Dale Smith from 4 Mechanised Brigade's post office e-bluey while collecting his unit's mail

e-bluey

Probably the best known of BFPO's systems is the hybrid mail system, e-bluey. It has allowed deployed personnel to send and receive letters from families and friends. Letters are downloaded, printed and sealed in theatre, as close to the point of delivery as possible. The time of transmission of a physical letter to a servicewoman is dramatically reduced, as it is not necessary to transport the letter through the mail system – which is particularly important in theatre as it reduces the logistic footprint.

The system is installed in 21 forward bases and patrol bases in Afghanistan and communications are provided by a portable broadband global area network satellite. E-bluey 2 uses existing hardware although replacement hardened laptops have been provided.

While the general look and feel of the website has been deliberately kept the same, there are important changes behind the scenes. The way information is inputted, transmitted and stored has been improved while the application and website incorporates recent technological advances in security; administrators are also better equipped to support the application.

'Track and Trace' with Pacer 2

Pacer 2 is a networked electronic accounting and 'track and trace' system for processing and management of all official mail worldwide; it also supports the movement of personal mail and parcels to entitled personnel serving overseas. The Defence Courier Module will also do the same for all protectively marked material.

Installing the system at Camp Bastion, the team sited terminals to suit working practices. External communications back to BFPO London is satisfied by the use of a Digital Video Broadcasting (DVB) satellite. Internally, a non-broadcasting, isolated wi-fi network was created so that each component of the system can 'talk' to each other.

While the DVB has proved stable, any communications outage would not directly impact on Pacer 2 as the system can continue to function off-line.

Pacer 2 has significantly speeded up receipting in mailbags as labels can be scanned in any order; it has also alleviated the need to maintain manual tick sheets. In addition to the handheld scanner, the team has sourced finger-mounted scanners and, once operational, these will also allow bags to be scanned and ticked in as the mail arrives.

Mail to onward locations will be processed more quickly and efficiently as only one bag needs to be scanned and the remainder will automatically be receipted and despatched to the end post office.

Pacer 2 has had a tough testing ground but has improved sorting and onward distribution of mail; it also provides HQ BFPO with visibility of the end-to-end mail chain.

Royal Mail systems at BFPO

HoL is the Post Office's bespoke counter management system. Adopted for use by the BFPO, it has been successfully introduced to almost every Forces Post Office. Sporting the latest Ingenico chip and pin card device, the system expands services and products available to the servicewoman overseas – many of these will be available in theatre too. In addition to normal chip and pin transactions, the system will allow individuals to check their UK bank balance, top up mobile phones in advance of a return on R&R, pay bills, transfer money, use the Moneygram service and deposit money in dollars on leaving theatre.

The system has also been well received by counter staff because it alleviates the need to maintain many of the manual ledgers. The system provides a complete electronic audit trail and stock management is better controlled.

E-blues downloaded and printed from the service at Camp Bastion by LCpl G' Gurung from 29 Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

