

**L**OOKING after more than one million customers is an enormous task. British Gas North Eastern has a turnover of several hundred million pounds a year and employs over six thousand people to run the British Gas services that range from sales enquiries and visiting customers in their homes, to the distribution of gas and development activities backed by modern technology. The British Gas North

Eastern transmission and distribution systems make gas available to 83 per cent of the households in the region and over the last three years the number of domestic customers supplied by the region has risen by more than 12,000 each year.

Computer systems have an important role to play in ensuring the success of a policy that, across the region, is constantly monitoring efficiency, performance and profitability.

As part of the industry's information technology strategy

the Executive Information Service (EIS) was established two years ago within the corporate planning department at the regional offices in Leeds.

Andy Wallis is the statistics and business information manager and head of a team of three developing the EIS. His brief was to establish a central pool of information and make it easily available to senior managers and executives throughout the region.

The Executive Information Service was to be aimed at 50 of the region's senior managers including the chairman and his management committee, and those with a particular interest in information and planning.

It was designed to bring together information from a multitude of sources and to include the monitoring of costs and other financial indicators, workload, sales of gas and appliances and overtime levels. It was to provide information on a regional level

# BRITISH GAS NORTH EASTERN Executive Information

The Executive Information Service (EIS) was established two years ago within the corporate planning department at British Gas North Eastern.

Pictured discussing the next stage of the EIS development programme with the corporate planning department team is (seated) Andy Wallis – statistics and business information manager, Amanda Moelwyn-Hughes – corporate planning assistant and Kevin Coyle – assistant corporate planning analyst.





The chairman and director of finance for British Gas North Eastern, Leeds, are both active users of the Executive Information Service (EIS).

John Dilks, director of finance is seen accessing the financial performance of the 15 districts which form part of the North Eastern region.

and to hold details of the 15 districts within British Gas North Eastern.

The volume of data for each period and the need to distribute the information quickly necessitated an electronic solution. Viewdata was the natural choice, since this medium is easy to use and was able to complement the detailed figures with simple histograms.

Following an upgrade to a ROCC 2830 system already used by the region to act as a viewdata host, development of the EIS began in September 1985 and was live on schedule in April 1986.

ROCC's Corporate Videotex software suite provides all the standard facilities of a private viewdata system plus the ability to develop more sophisticated applications using run programs.

"The run program facility is the major strength that allows us to store a sizeable database. It gives us the flexibility to access data in many ways to present information in the most effective manner. This involves

a combination of histograms showing trends and comparisons, backed up by tables of supporting information."

A feature of the British Gas North Eastern EIS is the advanced programming techniques which create histograms directly from the data.

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**"The run program facility is the major strength."**

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"Histograms make the best use of senior management's time in that a glance through a few pages will highlight exceptional results that require further investigation."

EIS displays histograms showing recent trends of performance. These take the form of vertical bars representing a monthly-year-to-date picture, with a comparison against the current period's budget, and the end-year budget.

Other histograms provide a comparison of performance

between the districts by displaying a percentage variation from target for all districts.

The histograms are dynamically created by run programs developed by British Gas North Eastern. These programs extract the figures from the database, scale the axes and paints the histogram on the screen.

Numeric information is displayed in the same way. For each page of information a 'mask' with headings and labels has been created which does not change from period to period. A run program associated with the mask extracts the figures from the database and fills the mask to create the complete display.

Where a user accesses a new page, similar in format to the current display – a previous time period or any one of 15 districts for example – only the data changes because the displays share a common mask. This avoids the repainting of the entire screen and considerably reduces the user's waiting time.

Andy Wallis says "My team have developed several other techniques to make the EIS both informative and easy to use".

For example, the 0 key has been reserved as a 'panic button'. From any point within the EIS route 0 returns the user to the top level menu.

This has a further advantage of providing a quick logging-off procedure. Log off is route 9 from the top menu, or 09 from any part of the service.

As the EIS develops, the service will be personalised by providing a "Top 10" for each user. This will provide a convenient route to the information most often accessed by that user.

Colour conventions are standardised throughout the EIS. Andy Wallis emphasises that "the correct use of colour is an essential part of

conveying information. Managers need to instantly absorb relevant details from every frame. The abuse of colour serves only to confuse and distract".

Yellow is used to display actual performance, and green is reserved for budgets and targets. A favourable variance from target is shown in cyan and adverse performance in red. Access to information is, however, only one feature. There is also the question of ensuring that the information is up-to-date from the various sources. Wallis depends on information from many sources in the region.

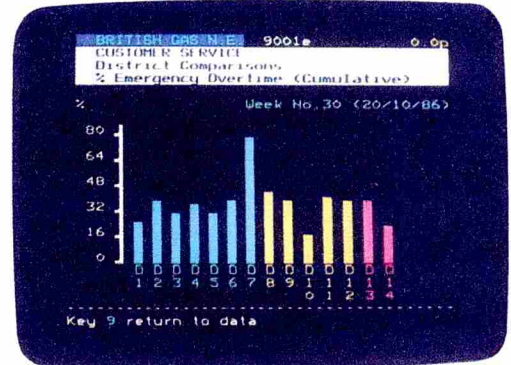
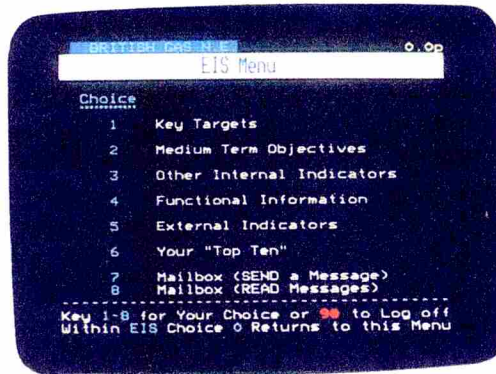
Most information for the EIS comes from an ICL 3980 mainframe which holds many applications to process the region's bulk data. Most of these systems culminate in a printed report of each period's performance.

The principle of directing these print files to the ROCC system makes the data available to the EIS with minimal mainframe development.

Information held on micro-based systems is pooled on the mainframe for onward transmission to the viewdata service.

With every department generating its own set of figures this data generated by an organisation the size of British Gas North Eastern is considerable. The experience that Wallis's team have gained with the ROCC system is considerable, and the final words must come from them.

"The key to a successful Information Service is to transform data into meaningful management information. This we have achieved by exploiting the full potential of ROCC's videotex software."



A typical journey through the Executive Information Service.

A glance at the bar chart identifies over target spending on overtime in D7 district at British Gas North Eastern.

The senior manager first checks to ensure that the overtime was wisely used and, indeed, discovers that D7 has the highest proportion of emergency overtime.

He can see that the trend of overtime for this district over recent months rose and last month was over budget, but this figure is well within year-end margins.

