

State of the nation

In the first of an occasional series, *Insurance Age* reverses its traditional regional review process. Instead of focusing on one region with the help of experts at a variety of companies, we take a look at all the regions with specialists at one company. We begin with Fusion Insurance Services – check out www.insuranceage.co.uk/2415458 for the interviews in full

WEATHERING THE STORM

David Bruce, chief executive of Fusion Insurance Services, explains how the Towergate-owned business weathered the storm engulfing its parent and coped with a mass staff exodus.



In June last year managing director Nick Wright and underwriting director Stewart Gardiner left along with Rob Chapman and Nick Milton, regional managers for the North and South respectively. Many colleagues soon followed.

"We were already down on what I would have said was where we needed to be [on staff numbers]," states Bruce.

"The exodus of staff was a catalyst to take a step back and do some capacity planning."

He adds: "At that point, for a broker looking in, it wasn't as easy to navigate us as it should be. That is probably the cornerstone of everything we are trying to do now."

Then came what Fusion terms the "hiatus" - the period during which parent group Towergate's future was uncertain. The unsecured creditors won the takeover battle in February and the recapitalisation completed in April.

"The Fusion brand is definitely here to stay," confirms Bruce, adding: "The group hiatus probably had a bigger impact on us than the leavers."

So what of those regions?

South

● Scott Hallett is the regional director for the South excluding London and is based in Bristol.



"I lost about a third of my staff," he says. "Five people handed their notice in on my second day."

He saw the upheaval as an opportunity to build his own team, change roles around and let people step up to new positions.

It has recruited heavily, to edge past the level from before the exodus. "We are up staff-wise, we were 26 and are now 27."

And as for the economy: "The South West looks like it is going in the right direction as is the South East. The UK is doing quite well."

Scotland and Northern Ireland



● The Northern Ireland offering of Fusion has been up and running for two years. "It has gone really well for us," states Trevor Hillman, regional director for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

He continues: "Scotland had its best month ever for new business in March." His positivity extends to the wider economy, with notable growth in the construction sector.

"I think back to the referendum and there was a complete pause, people were really wondering what was going to happen," he recounts. "But now we are seeing a lot of investment coming in. Oil and gas is poor, we'll do associated business, but not all the way down the line so that doesn't really impact on us too much."

Midlands



● The Midlands unit which also stretches across into East Anglia did not lose any staff for reasons linked to the mass exodus.

"We have stuck to the principles that we believe in," says the regional director for the Midlands, Paul Webley. He details that retention "throughout that period was rock solid".

He is similarly upbeat about the future with opportunities in an expanding local economy. "It's not boom time," he clarifies, "but back a few years we were servicing reductions in wage rolls and turnover among our clients and we are now seeing that go back the other way."

London



● Neil Peters is the regional director for London and for him the business is focused on a risk management orientated and a solution-based approach in an "incredibly competitive mid-market sector".

He lists RSA and Axa as being the types of providers he is likely to come up against in the "heartland" of property orientated commercial combined type risks.

"London is always a tough environment and

there is always a lot of capacity," he notes. During the past year retention has been "very good" and brokers have been "loyal" but echoing his colleagues new business has been "hard". Also like the other regions he foresees better times ahead for the company and the economy.

"We've expanded but we have to be pretty cautious," he details. "It is growing here and largely it is a pretty good picture."

North East



● Jon Hipkin is regional director for the North East based out of Leeds. "I came up at the end of July when all the notices were handed in - I had two before 9.30 on my first day."

In his first fortnight ten people resigned. "In the next three months we recruited 11 new people. Then the hiatus hit. It was difficult. We had support around renewals but brokers weren't in a place to move new business to us which was really difficult."

According to Hipkin there are plenty of opportunities locally and post the refinancing the branch is "starting to see the fruits of our labour". Since April it has had its best month "and secured some large pieces of business".

North West



● The Manchester office - headed by regional director for the North West, Vicky Spence - opened officially in January during the eye of Towergate's takeover storm. "There were difficult news stories and some worries," accepts Spence. The reaction was to "go on the front foot out to the market".

She sees "lots of green shoots" of recovery for both the region's economy and the group: "We've got lots of friends in the North West market who are starting to support us on our new business as well as on our retention."