

Proposed Response - The Future of Fire and Rescue Control Services in England (Consultation Exercise)

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report sets out a proposed response, on behalf of the Fire Authority, to the Government's recently announced consultation exercise regarding the future of fire control services in England.

2 Recommendations

Members are recommended to:

- a) Note the contents of this report, and
- b) Approve the proposed response to the consultation document on behalf of the Fire Authority.

3 Background

The national FiReControl project was instigated in 2004, with a directive via the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework,¹ that all Fire and Rescue Services would transfer control room functions to nine regional control centres by 2007.

¹ See: ODPM The Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2004/05 (p15) - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/128923.pdf>

With the project running over budget and well beyond original timescales, the Coalition Government announced² on 20 December 2010 its intention to cancel the project with immediate effect on the grounds that the appointed contractor, Cassidian (formerly EADS Defence & Security), was unable to deliver on time, to cost and quality.

4 Fire and Rescue Control Services Consultation

With the FiReControl project now cancelled, and recognising that Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) have a statutory function³ to deal with calls for assistance, the Government published (13 January 2011) a consultation document⁴ on the future of Fire and Rescue Control Services in England.

This document considers:

- the legacy assets from the FiReControl project and how they might best be used for the benefit of the taxpayer and the fire and rescue community
- the lessons learnt from the FiReControl project
- whether the aims of the project – improving national resilience, efficiency and the technology available to the fire and rescue services – are still valid and how these might be achieved
- the principles for allocating any funding available.

The Government has been explicit in stating⁵ that it believes the fire and rescue community is best placed to decide on the future of its control services and will not impose any solution.

The Fire Authority, at its February 2011 meeting, tasked officers to compile a draft response to the consultation document on its behalf and delegated authority to the Strategy and Resources Committee to consider and approve that response (as the consultation period ends on 8 April 2011).

The proposed response is appended for consideration by Members.

5 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial consequences arising from the proposed response to the consultation. The collective responses received by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) will, however, assist in determining the Government's strategy for financial assistance to fire and rescue authorities.

² See: Fire and Rescue Service IMMEDIATE BULLETIN, Bulletin number: 2, 20 December 2010 - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/1803710.pdf>

³ See: Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 - <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/21/contents>

⁴ See: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/fireandrescuecontrolservices.

⁵ See: Fire and Rescue Service IMMEDIATE BULLETIN, Bulletin number: 3, 13 January 2011 - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/1816022.pdf>

Separate to the consultation exercise, representation has been made on behalf of the Fire Authority to the DCLG to seek recompense for costs incurred locally as a consequence of both delays and cancellation of the FiReControl project.

6 Legal Comment

There are no legal consequences arising from the proposed response to the consultation.

Irrespective of the Government's decision to cancel the FiReControl project, the statutory duty to manage calls for assistance in the event of fires and other emergencies still resides with Fire and Rescue Authorities (as set out within the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004).

7 Equality Impact Assessment

Officers have considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Personnel 5 Part 2) and have determined that there are no discriminatory practices or differential impacts upon specific groups arising from this report. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

8 Appendix

Proposed Response - The Future of Fire and Rescue Control Services in England (Consultation)

9 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.

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Section 3 – Lessons from FiReControl

Q1 Do you agree with the assessment of FiReControl set out in Section 3? What lessons do you think we can learn from FiReControl – both positive and negative?

The assessment provides a fair, albeit brief, and reasonably accurate picture of the difficulties encountered in delivering to what was to all intents and purposes an overly ambitious project - overly ambitious not so much from a technology perspective but, perhaps, from the perspective of satisfying the local requirements of 46 autonomous end users: the Fire and Rescue Authorities/Services. In reality, even if the contractor had developed and implemented a technological solution that was deemed fit for purpose, the likelihood is that harmonisation of operational procedures and practices (including Integrated Risk Management Plans) would have been even more challenging.

In terms of lessons learnt, the Government, through the Office of Government and Commerce (OGC), already has in place a comprehensive and robust project and programme management framework (e.g. PRINCE2 and 'MSP'). The OGC⁶ approach, which includes gateway reviews,⁷ was clearly not followed diligently within the FiReControl Project. Had it been applied and external scrutiny sought from OGC, it is likely that the project would have been terminated earlier with less expenditure incurred. There seemed to be a number of people, who were determined to drive through the project in the face of overwhelming evidence that it could not work within the project plan scope.

Section 4 – Defining the policy objectives

Q2 Are resilience, enhanced technology and efficiency still as important today as they were when the FiReControl project was initiated? If not what has changed?

In brief yes, resilience is still important. But what has changed (although some would argue that the option/s always existed) is the ability to secure resilience through alternative and less ambitious (and costly) approaches to that advocated through the FiReControl project. The cited Welsh model (Case Study 2, page 21) of resilience is one that could easily be secured within England, be it regional, sub-regional or even pan-regional.

⁶ <http://www.ogc.gov.uk/>

⁷ http://www.ogc.gov.uk/what_is_ogc_gateway_review.asp

Technology has developed and continues to do so at such a pace that it is counter-productive to efficiency and effectiveness to embark upon large-scale, national, 'IT' projects that have lead-in times of several years. Small-scale, rapid deployment of low-cost solutions is probably more suitable to the current economic climate for fire controls. This type of 'bottom up' development also encourages rapid innovation rather than stagnation of the market that was always the risk with national procurement of a single mobilising system.

The consultation document, as with the FiReControl project, neglects to reflect the added value local fire controls bring to smaller fire and rescue services in addressing 'out of scope' activities. Efficiencies are achievable through fire controls undertaking business critical tasks (considered 'out of scope') supportive of the service, particularly out of hours. This out of scope work was almost completely put aside when the initial business plans for the FiReControl project were developed.

Q3 Which aspects of resilience described in Section 4 are most important for control services? Are there other aspects which are not mentioned here?

The ability to secure resilient fall-back arrangements within a small group of networked (and similar in terms of operations, e.g. Met-Met-Met, or CFA-CFA-CFA and not a mix) is considered to be most important. This should be for dealing with both spate conditions and also localised technology failure.

An important issue of resilience must be improved communications and data sharing with police and ambulance control rooms.

Q4 Do you think that there is a role for central government in supporting technical enhancements in fire and rescue control rooms – and, if so, what should this be?

The key role for government should be the development and implementation of national output performance standards, to which all fire controls should conform. The standards should be both technological (similar to 'GD92'⁸) and procedural (in terms of nomenclature, e.g. similar to 'Airwave Speak'⁹).

The market place (providers of command and control solutions) should be urged, through central government, to develop and manufacture a range of competing systems to defined and agreed national standards that support integration to secure resilience.

⁸ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/130808.pdf>

⁹ http://www.npia.police.uk/en/docs/File_F_AirwaveSpeak_Training_National_User_Guide.pdf

Q5 Do you think that there is a role for central government in helping fire and rescue authorities to achieve greater efficiencies in the delivery of control services – and, if so, what should this be?

The opportunity for central government would be to offer 'invest to save' grants to those fire and rescue authorities, who elect to share control room functions, be this physical (buildings), resources (staff) or technological (shared command and control systems).

Additionally, a significant and often overlooked cost for all fire authorities resides in Firelink charges, which do not represent value for money when considered on a 'per incident' basis. It must be remembered that the FiReControl project was supposed to facilitate the extensive use of data, as opposed to voice, communications.

Firelink charges will now increase, and not decrease. A potential role for central government (CLG) would be collective bargaining with both the Home Office and Health Department to achieve lower service charges from Airwave. This will be particularly important in coming years when the current Airwave contracts for fire, police and ambulance expire.

Section 5 – Central government support

Q6 Which of the approaches (or combination of approaches) for the delivery of control services set out in Section 5 would provide the best outcome for the fire and rescue community and the public? Please give reasons for your choice.

Preferred approach:

A combination of local determination with central funding and support, adhering to national standards owned by sector.

Reasons:

England has 46 fire and rescue authorities/services, all different, all serving local communities, all locally accountable, and in due course, all likely to be funded (in future years) by the local community through council/business taxes. In the context of 'Big Society' localism is paramount, with local determination key. However, the vacuum created by the cancellation of the FiReControl project, a national project, has created a financial burden locally that should be addressed (in terms of meeting technological costs to replace legacy systems) through central funding and support. Local tax payers should not face the burden of a failed Central Government project.

To secure resilience between partner/buddy control rooms it is essential to develop national standards (see response to Q4 above).

Section 6 – Funding choices

Q7 Do you agree that the right funding priorities are set out in Section 6 and do you have any comments on the order in which these are presented?

The presented funding priorities appear to be appropriate, but the presented order should be adjusted to:

1. Completing the installation of Firelink as the top priority
2. Funding technical enhancements to improve resilience
3. Funding accommodation or control room infrastructure costs arising out of delays to FiReControl
4. Funding restructuring costs to support shared control services

Firelink as a priority is considered sensible. Secondary to Firelink should be the funding of technical enhancements to improve resilience (be this through new or integrated legacy command and control systems). These are the two top priorities that should be addressed **now** to secure business continuity within the fire and rescue service sector.

The funding of accommodation or control room infrastructure costs arising out of delays to FiReControl are largely financial recovery matters and whilst important (and must be addressed) are not business critical. The funding of restructuring costs to support shared control services is considered to be more longer term and must be subject to proven business cases of deliverable benefits, as opposed to a knee-jerk reaction to the cancellation of FiReControl.

Q8 Which of the technical options for Firelink (see Annex C) would best meet fire and rescue service needs? Please give reasons for your choice.

Preferred Option:

Option 3 – Implement a full networked voice and data connection to Firelink in existing control rooms.

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) is a legacy BT Airwave user and has, since 2002, benefited from full integration to Airwave via dedicated CCI ports. Any departure from Option 3 would be a backward step and unacceptable for SFRS. Based on 9 years' experience, SFRS would advocate that Option 3 be made available to all fire and rescue services.