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Response to consultation on Fire and Resilience Programme in-Service Management

A consultation issued July 2009 for response by 5th October 2009

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1   Purpose of Report

This report outlines the response to the above consultation document.

2   Recommendations

The Strategy and Resources Committee is asked to:

a)   Agree or make amendments to the consultation response.

3   Background

The Fire and Resilience Programme was set up to deliver a number of strategic changes to the fire and rescue service needed to deal with, as the Government states:

'The threat posed by the future including and increased terrorist threat and the risks posed by major incidents such as flooding.'

There are three major project streams namely:

New Dimension – in this Service we have been provided with a Large Volume Pumping Unit and Hose Layer (Prees) an Incident Response Unit (Shrewsbury) and a decontamination 're-robe unit' (Prees). The maintenance of these units has been outsourced nationally to VT Thorneycroft. CLG are still discussing the ownership of these units and wishes FRS to take ownership. Our current stance is that future and ongoing central management must continue to lie with Central Government and the funding of such assets,

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including replacement, must be adequate and transparent both to the Public and FRAs. This position is supported by CFOA and the Legal Advisors.

FiReLink – this is the new digital radio system now rolling out across the country and is the same system that all emergency services operate in the UK.

FiReControl – this is the network of nine regional control centres in England which should improve the interoperability of FRAs control and mobilisation across the country.

Both Firelink and Fire Control currently have no method for central management except that provided directly by CLG. Central Government wish to remain 'strategic' and not have day to day management of the national assets but wish to retain a significant influence in its ongoing resilience.

The two areas of (1).'In-service' management of the service contracts and (2). Service Assurance that the provided solutions continue to be resilient and interoperable, are now part of a consultation to Fire Authorities and to Members of Local Authority Controlled Companies. In the Consultation document CLG propose a few possible solutions and ask for Elected Member's response.

Below is your officers considered response.

Q1 Do you agree that the service contracts for FiReLink and FiReControl should be managed by a Non Departmental Public Body based on and incorporating Firebuy? If not what alternative would you propose?

Firebuy may be one solution but as all three of the Emergency Services are using Airwave as their communications network it may be more efficient to create a single NDPB along the lines of the National Police Improvement Agency with representatives from each of the emergency services and other key stakeholders as Board Members. This would avoid having three separate bodies looking after the same radio system for three 999 services. In addition it could be expanded to incorporate other smaller volume users such as the Coast Guard thus giving them a place at the table.
Whichever way is chosen the funding of this central body should remain with Central Government and the costs of providing central services should be transparent to FRS and the public.

Q2. Do you agree that the Board should include candidates nominated by the key stakeholders? What other views do you have about the size and composition of the Board?

Not withstanding our comments and suggestions above a 'single purpose' Board should have key stakeholders represented including LGA; CFOA and CLG. Additionally consideration may be given to having Board Members representing each Region and each devolved administration; this may make the Board large with 14 Members.

If a single 999 Radio Communications Board was set up then the Board would need to represent each of the users as well as Central Government with perhaps sub committees for each emergency service.

Q3 Do you agree that the NPIA model of stakeholder engagement for Airwave would be the right one for the new NDPB to follow in relation to the Fire and Resilience Programme? Do you have another model you would like to propose? How else can stakeholders be engaged?

The NPIA uses a Programme Board model to get maximum representation from users. This would seem a very appropriate solution to both the FireBuy solution and a joint 999 user's solution.

The consultation questions now move to the National Assurance function. This is related principally to the RCCs and 5 objectives set by CLG that the sector led assurance function would be able to:

1. Ensure the long term maintenance of the core features of a national interoperable and resilient system, as specified in a memorandum of understanding with the department.
2. Do so within an agreed cost
3. Cover any shortfall in income from FRAs without recourse to the Department
4. Accept responsibility for any liabilities arising from the operation of the national assurance scheme – e.g. as a result of guidance issued by the assurance body.
5. Ensure that operational considerations would drive decision making rather than political considerations.

Q4 Do you agree that, if possible, the national assurance functions should be carried out by the sector itself? If so, what model would you propose? If not, what alternative would you propose?

Officers believe that ultimately a sector led, but nationally funded, organisation should indeed manage the national assurance functions. However, the current situation with further delays in the Fire Control Project and a great deal of uncertainty of the costs and technology may lead Members to conclude that it is far too early in the project to even consider passing the responsibility on to a new Board. Rather it may be recommended that any discussion about a new management organisation for national assurance is delayed until the FireControl project is completed and the system is proven – say 6 months after total system 'go live'. There may however, be merit in creating a 'shadow board' leading up to this date.
The objectives numbered 3 and 4 above also raises some issues. Any organisation set these terms would have to create reserves and 'profit' to guard against liabilities and cost overruns. This in turn may increase the cost of the RCC network for local fire and rescue Authorities. Member would need much more information on the long term costs of accepting this recommendation before a decision could be made.

Q5. Do you agree that if the sector is unwilling or unable to carry out the function in a way that meets the criteria set out in paragraph 41 of this consultation paper, it should be carried out by the NRPB which the Department proposes should manage the service contracts? If not, what alternative would you propose?

This appears at first reading to suggest that if Members do not agree with the CLG they will go ahead with the transfer of responsibilities anyway and will use the previously discussed NRPB.

Clearly the concern is that we are discussing the long term management arrangements for a system that is still not constructed and not proven to work in the way defined in the business case. Members will have no detailed information on the exact costs for this Authority for the whole system and its running costs so it is recommended that we respond to say that clearly we would want all stakeholders to be involved in the management of the National Assurance function as long as the costs are borne by Central Government and that they are transparent both to the FRAs and the public.

Q6. Do you have views on whether the national assurance and service contract management functions should be carried out by the same organisation on practical grounds.

With the caveats above it may be practical to do so. But it is perhaps more important that we manage each issue in the best way for the service as a whole.
Clearly if all 999 Airwave users managed the service contracts for the Firelink project from a single NRPB, a great deal of expertise would develop which would make sure that the tax payer had value for money and the Government had the greatest long term return for its investment.

Rather than separating assurance from contract management it may be preferable to have one organisation managing both the contract and assurance for the Radio system, (in this case nationally for all 999 users) and another for the network of RCCs and the equipment they require to operate the whole system (Mobile Data Terminals etc.)

Q7. Do you have any comments on the high level description of the functions listed at appendix A?

No comments.

4   Financial Implications

Officer's current concerns are that there is insufficient financial information or certainty.

5   Legal Comment

We are currently in ongoing legal discussions both with our own legal advisors, nationally and regional.

6   Equality Impact Assessment

This report is purely on a proposition from Government. Any EQIA on the final proposal will therefore be developed by CLG.

7   Appendix

There are no appendices attached to this report.

8   Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.

Implications of all of the following have been considered and, where they are significant (i.e. marked with an asterisk), the implications are detailed within the report itself.

Balanced Score Card		Integrated Risk Management Planning	
Business Continuity Planning		Legal	*
Capacity		Member Involvement	
Civil Contingencies Act		National Framework	
Comprehensive Performance Assessment		Operational Assurance	*
Efficiency Savings		Retained	
Environmental		Risk and Insurance	
Financial	*	Staff	
Fire Control/Fire Link	*	Strategic Planning	
Information Communications and Technology		West Midlands Regional Management Board	
Freedom of Information / Data Protection / Environmental Information		Equality Impact Assessment	*