

REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

UPDATE ON REGIONAL FIRE CONTROLS AND CONVERGENCE MANAGEMENT FOR FIRECONTROL AND FIRELINK PROJECTS

1 Purpose of Report

To update Members on the progress of both national projects and recommend methods of supporting these critical infrastructure initiatives.

2 Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- a) Note the update on Regional Fire Control and National FireLink Projects;
- b) Task Officers to enter discussions with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on 'net additional costs';
- c) Agree to create a temporary (two year) post of 'Project Manager Fire Control Convergence'; and
- d) Agree to use reserves of £4,500 to fund this post prior to Government funding becoming available in April 2006.

3 Background

At its meeting in July 2005 the Fire Authority tasked the Chief Fire Officer with keeping Members updated on the likely costs of the FiReControl and FiReLink projects. It was hoped that the full outline business case would be released in the autumn of 2005 and the costs to the Authority would then be known. The Business Case was not released at that time, however, due to business confidentiality, so information is still not available.

Following the elections and subsequent reshuffle of responsibilities the new Fire Service Minister, Jim Fitzpatrick MP, spent some time reviewing all projects within his area but no further information on cost assumptions has been forthcoming.

All MPs were invited to a meeting with the Minister in December of last year. There was a poor turnout from West Midlands MPs with only the Member for Wyre Forest in attendance.



The ODPM has published documents that relate to the project and the relevant contents are discussed below.

4 Most Recent Cost Assumptions

Draft Framework Document

The new draft framework document significantly changes the responsibilities on Regional Management Boards (RMBs) in relation to regional control centres. In previous framework documents it stated that the RMBs **should** support regional control centres, whereas in the new document this is more firmly stated as a **must**.

In particular, the Framework now states that fire and rescue authorities, through RMBs, **must** establish regional control centres as an operational priority; work closely with Government to ensure phased transition from existing control rooms and ensure that the local authority companies, who will run the control centres on behalf of the fire and rescue authorities, are established in spring 2006.

Fire Service Circular 63/2005

Most recently Fire Service Circular 63/2005 set out the expected funding for the two projects. The Government realises that the FiReContol project will place new burdens on fire and rescue authorities. The ODPM, therefore, commits to providing additional funds to meet the 'net additional costs' associated with Regional Fire Control going live during 2008 and 2009 (the West Midlands Regional Control goes live towards the end of 2008). Over the life of the project the Government is investing over £160 million to deliver the national network of regional centres.

The definition of 'net additional cost', as set out in the Circular, is the net overall costs of introducing regional control centres over and above the amount the fire and rescue authority would otherwise have incurred in upgrading. The ODPM recognises that circumstances of individual fire and rescue authorities may vary. Some may have net additional costs where others do not. The ODPM, therefore, promises to consider each on a case by case basis.

It is recommended that this Fire Authority makes early provision for discussions with the ODPM. The case for net additional costs is very good, as the Authority has already invested in a robust interim measure to secure its mobilising and communications capacity. Firm information on costs to the Fire Authority is still vague, so it is not yet possible to develop budgets to cover the costs associated with the new regional controls, which are:

Control Accommodation

The Fire Authority will be required to pay for the leasing of the building etc. from the go live date (end of 2008). Until that point the ODPM will fund. The leasing costs are not known.

Technology

The ODPM states that there will be no costs relating to the use of FiReControl infrastructure; neither do they believe that there will be new burdens arising from the FireLink radio scheme. It is still not clear, however, exactly what will be included within the final technical solution, so ultimate costs are not known.



Current Systems

Any upgrading of current systems to maintain operability must be paid for by fire and rescue authorities.

Data Migration

Officers need to do the scoping and planning work to carry out the data migration, after which the ODPM will provide funding 'less any savings'. They suggest that this is carried out by brigade specialists with extra support, if necessary.

Information and Communication Technology Interfaces

The Fire Authority will, in effect, receive only a basic connection to the fire control, so it will need to fund its own connection and management information systems.

Convergence

Officers are expected to do the scoping and planning work required to prepare for convergence and also to converge our systems to the new regional control. Once again the ODPM will fund this (less any savings) to agreed levels.

Training and Cover Costs

The ODPM assumes that most of the training will be absorbed in the normal training schedule, however, should these assumptions be wrong, they promise to revisit this position.

Overstaffing

The ODPM will provide additional funding for overstaffing during the migration period. They state that this will pay for training newly recruited staff to ensure their competence. However, the migration period is only 6 months prior to cut over and it takes at least 6 months to train someone sufficiently to have the basic competence of a fire control operator. It will, therefore, be necessary to plan carefully for this part of the convergence to ensure operational cover for Shropshire is maintained.

Staff Retention

It will be necessary to produce a well thought out staff retention strategy, which the Fire Authority will have to fund.

Regional Local Authority Company

The ODPM has decided that the local authority company is the best model for management of the regional fire control. Details of governance are sketchy at present and it has been agreed nationally that Brigades will fund a specialist lawyer to analyse the proposals from the Government (at a cost of £500 per brigade). The ODPM will fund set-up costs but ongoing costs, currently not known, will be funded by the fire authorities on a shared regional basis.

There is a great deal of work to do and a limited amount of time in which to do it.

5 Project Staff Costs

The Government has now recognised that to prepare for all of the foregoing issues each brigade will need a dedicated project management team. To this end it has announced that it will fund £53,000 per year per fire authority until the end of the migration period. This amount of money is helpful but will only go some way to fund the extra work involved – but it is a start.



Officers are currently in the process of Project Initiation and will soon be in a position to start the three-year process of convergence. To enable rapid progress officers have decided to place a dedicated Project Manager for all aspects of FireControl / Firelink convergence. This officer will manage the project under Prince2 methodology. Officers will arrange for this post to be filled and any minor costs outside the Government funding will be contained within existing budgets. Funding will become available from April but officers wish to start work immediately. Members are, therefore, asked to agree to fund this post from savings until April.

6 Legal Comment

There are no legal comments arising directly out of this report.

7 Financial Implications

The financial implications are unknown at this stage but the whole convergence project is likely to cost more than £53,000 per year. Once better financial information is known this will be shared with Members.

8 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no equality or diversity implications arising from this report.

9 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

10 Background Papers

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority

20 July 2005, Report 17 - Update on Regional Fire Controls

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Fire and Rescue Service Circular 63-2005 - Fire Projects Implementation Funding for 2006-07 and 2007-08

Draft Framework 2006 - 2008

For further information about this report please contact Alan Taylor, Chief Fire Officer, on 01743 260201, or Paul Raymond, Deputy Chief Fire Officer on 01743 260201.

