

Division(s):	ALL
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CABINET MEMBER FOR SAFER & STRONGER COMMUNITIES 14 February 2011

Consultation on the Future of Fire Control Services in England Report by Chief Fire Officer

Introduction

1. On 20 December, the Fire Minister, Bob Neill, announced the cancellation of the National FiReControl Project following agreement between the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the main IT contractor Cassidian (formerly EADS) that the requirements of the project could not be delivered to an acceptable timeframe. The contract was terminated with immediate effect and the project closed down.
2. CLG published a consultation paper on the future of fire and rescue control services on 14 January. The consultation paper invites views on the priorities for control services in the future and the allocation of any funding that may be available from central government and which will be influenced by decisions on the use of control centre buildings and moving to shared control services. The consultation paper can be accessed from the CLG website here: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/fireandrescuecontrolservices>
3. The aim of the consultation paper is to seek views from the fire and rescue community on whether changes are needed to the way control services are currently constructed. The consultation closes on 8 April 2011 and Ministers expect to make an announcement on the way forward quickly following the end of the consultation process.
4. The consultation paper considers the lessons from FiReControl and considers whether the policy objectives which led to the project remain the right ones to shape the future of control services. The consultation paper summarises Government's views on those policy objectives as:
 - Resilience – Government supports the aims of resilience but believes there are alternative approaches that could provide a more proportionate and affordable solution than FiReControl
 - Enhanced Technology – fire and rescue services have continued to develop their technology systems and many of the features that FiReControl would have introduced are already available

- Efficiency – in light of financial pressures, fire and rescue services will be looking for ways to reduce the cost of their control service.
5. The consultation paper goes on to consider alternative scenarios for control services with the aim of decentralising the role as far as possible. The scenarios discussed are:
- (i) A system of local controls without any central intervention or financial support;
 - (ii) The development of a common set of standards (allowing interoperability between control rooms);
 - (iii) Greater collaboration between fire and rescue authorities with some central intervention or support; and
 - (iv) A standard networked solution.
6. Government's preferred approach is for (iii) under which they would provide financial support to fire and rescue authorities to improve their existing control services and make the most of FiReControl assets.
7. The amount of central funding available for upgrading control services is not yet known, but CLG is seeking to achieve a balance between operational need, fairness and value for the tax payer. The consultation paper sets out current thinking on the order of priorities for funding as:
- Completing the installation of Firelink as the top priority
 - Funding restructuring costs to support shared control services
 - Funding technical enhancements to improve resilience
 - Funding accommodation or control room infrastructure costs arising out of delays to FiReControl

Regional and local consultation responses

8. South East Chief Fire Officers met on 19 January to discuss the consultation and received an oral presentation from Roger Hargreaves, the National Project Director from the Department for Communities and Local Government. It was clear from this that the level of funding available was directly associated with the reduction in DCLG financial liabilities related to the buildings and completion of the required Firelink (digital radio) systems in a large number of control rooms, rather than the previously intended 9.
9. The meeting recognised that in the South East several individual and joint options appraisals were ongoing. It was clear that a reduced number of Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) Control rooms were envisaged in the future.

10. It was agreed that each FRS, on behalf of its Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA), would respond to the consultation but a response from the former region was needed to make clear the commitment to convergence processes and an eventual reduced number of mobilising centres in the south east. This approach will enable south east FRSs to lobby the Government for funding to support the transition process.
11. The next delegated decisions meeting falls after the consultation closes. Extra information from DCLG is emerging as time passes and therefore Oxfordshire is not yet able to finalise the consultation response.
12. However, it is possible to give an indicative response to the specific questions provided and the recommendation seeks to have this approach endorsed and any subsequent non material amendments and additions to be delegated to the Chief Fire Officer to allow submission.

Consultation Questions and indicative responses

13. The following indicative responses are proposed:

Consultation Question	Indicative response
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?	Broadly the issues highlighted of IT delivery, early decision taking and relationship issues with the Fire and Rescue community are supported. In addition, there was a fundamental failure in the project management of the overall contract with the IT supplier which will be highlighted in the response
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?	The three items are agreed as still fundamentally important. The concept of efficiency as measured by calls handled per operator shift is not considered to be of prime importance as the wider command and control functions of existing controls were never and appear still not to be understood by those carrying out the consultation. Command and control and supporting administrative activities integrated with effective call receipt and mobilising functions create opportunities which complement the localism approach.
Q3 Which aspects of resilience described in Section 4 are most important for control services?	The consultation recognises that arrangements with more than the 9 regional controls are likely to have less capacity in spate conditions.

<p>Are there other aspects which are not mentioned here?</p>	<p>However, the need to be able to answer high volumes of calls, or have the ability for a triage stage to identify life risk calls from high volumes of lower risk calls is considered to be the most important aspect of resilience in the future.</p>
<p>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?</p>	<p>Yes. The role should be to promote a common set of technical standards in future control functions to allow interoperability and increased capacity and ultimately resilience.</p>
<p>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?</p>	<p>Yes. The role should extend to the provision of framework contracts from a variety of suppliers from which FRAs can source appropriate systems in a cost effective manner. In addition there is still a role for central government as the 'Authority' in holding the national Fire contract with MMNO2 Airwave for digital radio provision.</p>
<p>Section 5 – Central government support</p>	
<p>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.</p>	<p>At this time due to emerging information it is not yet clear what is fully meant by each option. However, the approach required should allow local determination, be developed against common technical standards and allow increased collaboration between FRAs (or other appropriate partners). Central government support by developing common technical standards, letting framework contracts and providing financial support during transition is considered desirable.</p>
<p>Section 6 – Funding choices</p>	
<p>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?</p>	<p>Oxfordshire are concerned that the volume of support available to FRAs is being limited due to the intentions to minimise the legacy effects of the buildings (with their apparently unbreakable contracts) and the need to complete increased number of installations for the Airwave radio system in current controls. These aspects appear to be dictating the long term future for FRS mobilising systems. This said the funding priorities appear to have some merit.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>A technical assessment of the implications regarding the three options available to FRAs in the south east (option 4 is not available as use of the existing regional control centre will not occur). An oral update will be given to the delegated decisions meeting.</p>

14. The above responses can be supplemented by a general statement that at this time an options appraisal is being undertaken which will identify credible alternatives for the future. These can then be assessed in greater detail.

Financial and Staff Implications

15. There are no direct financial effects from this consultation response. However, there will be effects in both areas following the determination of a way forward. It is not possible at this time to quantify these.

RECOMMENDATION

16. **The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:**
- a) **endorse the indicative responses to the above consultation questions;**
 - b) **delegate to the Chief Fire Officer authority to make any non material amendments and additions to allow submission by the due date; and**
 - c) **require the Chief Fire Officer to ensure that any material amendments and additions made to the CLG submission will be subject to further consultation with the responsible Cabinet Member.**

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Background papers: DCLG Consultation 'The future of fire and rescue control services in England'.

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