



Proposed Thames Valley Fire Control Service

**Report of Engagement
with Control Centre staff
at Royal Berkshire and
Oxfordshire (County Council)
Fire and Rescue Services**

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Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) and Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS) on the important engagement reported here. We trust this report will contribute to their consideration of a Joint Fire Control service and their future policies.

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Above all, we are grateful to the 26 members of the Control staff who took part in the forums and shared their views. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions. They all engaged with the issues and discussed their ideas readily.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will be useful in thinking about the proposed Thames Valley Fire Control Service and in strengthening RBFRS' and OFRS' engagement with its staff.

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Project Overview

Introduction

1. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue services, and our status as the sole approved provider of research and engagement services under the terms of the Fire Services Consultation Association's National Framework Contract, ORS was jointly commissioned by Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) and Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS) to convene and facilitate two joint Control Centre staff engagement forums to discuss the proposed Thames Valley Fire Control Service. The two joint staff forums formed part of a wider engagement programme encompassing randomly selected members of the public in deliberative forums in both counties.
2. ORS' role was to design, facilitate and report the two joint forums. We worked in collaboration with RBFRS and OFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings. Since this was a joint commission by both FRSs, and because both forums involved Control Centre staff from both organisations, we have prepared a single integrated report. The forums used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage the staff to reflect in depth about the reasons for and implications of the proposed changes.
3. Each forum lasted for about three hours and a total of 26 Control Centre staff took part – a high proportion of the total number of Control Centre staff. The meeting on the evening of June 18 was attended by 18 people and there were eight at the meeting the following morning. Both meetings were held at the Shillingford Bridge Hotel, Wallingford, Oxfordshire.
4. In the facilitation, care was taken to ensure that all participants were able to contribute and the meetings were conducted sensitively in the light of the important issues being discussed. RBFRS and OFRS staff attended both meetings and readily agreed to be mixed on small round table discussion groups. The outcomes reported are a faithful reflection of all that was said.
5. The structure and discussion agenda for the two meetings was standardised as follows:
 - Profiles of RBFRS and OFRS – including their resources, strategic roles, incident profiles and challenges
 - Background to the proposals – including abandonment of regional control centre initiative and financial pressures arising from the four-year public spending review
 - Recent history of proposals for regional Fire Control Rooms
 - RBFRS' and OFRS' current Control Room arrangements
 - Other options considered by RBFRS and OFRS
 - Proposal for a joint Thames Valley Fire Control Service and its advantages
6. Around these topics, the participants were given extensive time for questions and discussion prior to being asked for their views on the key aspects of the proposals. Everyone was happy to discuss the issues in depth and then to express their overall judgements which were recorded in real-time in PowerPoint.

The Report

7. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about the proposed Thames Valley Fire Control Service. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. On this occasion we have given more quotations than normal – to ensure that the sentiments of both forums are expressed clearly and that readers are fully aware of staff views.

Engagement Findings with Commentary

Introduction

8. This section reports the findings from the two Control Centre staff engagement forums while also revealing the reasoning of participants. Naturally, both sets of participants shared considerable common ground so it has been possible, without distortion, to write a single report.
9. To prompt detailed discussion, the supposed benefits that RBFRS and OFRS believe will result from the Joint Control were outlined in detail – in particular the operational, resilience, efficiency and financial benefits. The operational benefits of the proposals were said to offer a better service to the public and fire fighters due to:
 - Improved caller location information
 - Automatic Vehicle Location System (AVLS) give quicker response times from nearest resource
 - More user-friendly mobilising system with “rule sets” so Control Room operators can focus on swift mobilising
 - Further provision/upgrade of Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs) for safer work systems
 - New ICT to support Operators in fire survival guidance
 - Possible to transfer calls via Direct Electronic Incident Transfer (DEIT) to other emergency services – thus reducing voice traffic, potential delays and increasing accuracy by avoiding dual entry of details
 - Better operational procedures via the ops alignment work stream
10. The resilience and efficiency benefits were summarised as comprising:
 - New systems replacing ageing system, reducing potential failure
 - Improved ICT security for interconnection reducing risk
 - Fully equipped secondary control for effective fall back
 - Remote buddy to take overflow calls and with ability to mobilise directly for all incidents
 - Movement to data for routine messages reduces operator workload
 - Adoption of standard procedures in both FRSs will allow future alignment of procurement, policy and training arrangements.
11. The possible efficiency and value-for-money gains were contextualised in relation to the reductions in central government funding and the relative costs of different Control Centres, as shown in the following table.

Comparative Efficiency Table					
Service	Emergencies attended p.a.	Ctrl Staffing	Avg Emergencies per Operator/ p.a.	Avg Emergencies per Operator/ Shift	Staffing Costs/ Emergency £
London	120,692	115	1,049	6.36	52.45
TVFCS *	13,217	30	440	2.6	77.99
Lancashire	21,158	42	503	3.0	78.64
Kent	17,653	36	490	2.9	90.15
Humberside	11,543	33	349	2.1	130.08
RBFRS	7,674	34	225	1.36	146.58
OFRS	5,543	26	213	1.29	169.81

* Indicative figures

12. In this context, staff were reminded that the proposals for a Joint Control are based partly on estimated annual savings of £880K.
13. Following this introduction, there were full discussions of the key aspects of the proposals, in particular the claimed resilience and efficiency benefits.

Resilience?

14. Both forums were somewhat sceptical about the supposed resilience benefits, the second smaller meeting more emphatically than the first. Both meetings doubted that an automated, IT-based system with more standardisation protocols would really be better than experienced, interactive and sensitive human operators. For example, some typical comments along these lines were:

With RTCs the IT system can be dangerous if we rely on it uncritically to locate incidents – because it can be misleading – and the project is being sold on this basis – but the human expertise is important if IT fails

We shouldn't have so much faith in IT – as the main sales point!

15. The second forum, in particular, stressed a number of related doubts about the resilience of more IT-based system:

Caller location can be problematic for many incidents – especially RTCs – you need the human interface

Are there any statistics or data to support the claims about improved caller locations? This is a key selling point for those who are promoting these systems – and it should be confirmed

You cannot rely too much on automation and ICT because the operators have to have the 'human skills' of dealing with stressed callers in urgent circumstances.

16. The staff felt that they provide such a good service that there is no need for a whole new system – for example:

The 2007 flooding was handled effectively in Oxfordshire's Control with a great deal of commitment – without all these IT refinements – so it seems unnecessary to make the IT changes.

17. Reflections on resilience also led some staff to question whether, whichever one of the two organisations provides the secondary back-up Control, it could be crewed sufficiently quickly in an emergency in which the primary Joint Control failed for some reason:

How quickly can the secondary control be set up in an emergency? Kidlington and Reading are up to two hours' for staff to travel between.

18. Apart from the fear that the main Control might fail for some reason and there would be a delay in commissioning the secondary Centre, there were repeated worries about how spate conditions might overload the primary Centre (due to too few staff on duty) and whether the auto-overflow of emergency calls to the remote buddy support would lead to operational confusion in terms of who has final control over the deployment of pumps to incidents:

Sometimes in spate conditions we need more trained staff – but you are going to reduce staff numbers and increase the calls. How well do the staff-recall arrangements work currently?

This could worsen resilience in spate conditions with twice the number of calls coming into the same centre – and the remote buddy 'overflow system' may lead to the inappropriate deployment of our fire engines that could jeopardise our capacity to deal with spate conditions effectively

We need to be convinced that spate conditions will be more resiliently dealt with under the proposals – the remote buddy control has to relate effectively with the primary Control. Spate conditions never work in a standard way!

The main resilience concern is how to establish effective protocols with the remote buddy FRS to deal effectively with spate conditions without 'conflicting' with the primary Control

How will the remote buddy co-ordinate with our own Control which could also be dealing with the same incidents? What if the buddy control room becomes over-loaded or goes down because they are dealing with our spate conditions? How effectively will we be able to work with an outside authority to provide a service for us?

Will the remote buddy be able to mobilise simultaneously with us in relation to the same pumps? Who will have overall control when the remote buddy kicks in during spate conditions? We have had experience with Vector allocating resources and then having to be corrected.

19. In this context, there were also concerns about the feasibility of the 'remote buddy back-up system' – as the following questions and statements show:

How do you choose a compatible remote buddy?

Do you have a particular remote buddy in mind?

The remote buddy authority itself might merge with another FRS (or others) and then it might have to deal with our calls and all their own – for example, in Yorkshire – and that might not work

Will the buddies all have the same equipment? Are they not all doing different things? We need to choose the remote buddy very carefully – and the staffing schedule.

What is already in place elsewhere and how are the arrangements working out? Have attendance times been affected?

20. There were also concerns that the Joint Control might not be sustainable without a full merger of RBFRS and OFRS to resolve possible policy and procedural differences:

It is not a merger, but how much will be done jointly? It could lead to having to develop general joint policies – the fear then is that there'll be disagreement – or else a full merger of necessity – there are many procedural and operational issues where autonomy might be reduced in the need for standardisation – and Control staff might have to operate two sets of policies

Can the system be programmed for the relevant PDAs for each authority?

There are potential organisational and autonomy issues – in terms of having to standardise policies or even merge entirely.

21. Both forums were worried about staffing numbers in the Joint Control, in terms of whether the reduced staff could cope with the call volumes for two FRSs – and they doubted the wisdom of dealing with administrative calls separately (by different staff):

The key worry is that fewer staff will have to deal with incidents across two counties – the risk increases with the larger area! You are cutting staff for a larger area!

Will there be enough people in the Control Centre to handle both sets of calls?

You will have fewer staff in spate conditions

I have fewer calls, but I am overall busier than ever before in terms of the RDS and other administrative calls

What will happen to the admin calls in the proposed Joint Control Centre – will they be outsourced or dealt with by other staff?

Will a lot of the administrative calls be removed from the Control Centre in the new system? If so, what will happen overnight?

You will have to find other people to take the administrative (fit and sick) calls – and it seems like an unnecessary change to do that. The Control's role is to maintain staff cover as well as taking the emergency calls

It's unnecessary to move the admin calls to other staff if Control staff can deal with them!

22. There was also speculation that the two FRSs might use the Joint Control IT systems to reduce the number of skilled and experienced staff, in a sort of dumbing-down, call centre approach:

These automated systems seem to dumb-down the operator skills in Control Centres. Are you planning to employ cheaper, less well-qualified staff with lower levels of skills – will you employ "call centre workers" rather than the qualified operatives we have now?

23. Finally, no one argued that all the existing staff would refuse to apply for the new Joint Control, but one person asked:

At the basic level, have the FRSs both considered the wealth of experience and commitment that the Control staff have and have you considered the implications of the current staff not going forward to the new Control Centre?

Efficiency Savings?

24. Comments about the number of calls taken (as opposed to emergencies dealt with) led to many other comments that the efficiency calculations are based on the emergency incidents per operator, but take no account of the actual total number of calls received:

The costings take account only of the emergency calls – you do not seem to take account of the full range of services we provide – and have the public been told of all the things we do?

The IT system will not replace all the communications we have to do with emergency callers and crews during incidents

Regarding the costings for incidents, and the comparison of incidents attended, do the figures include repeat calls and cases where we take a call but do not actually respond? We have incidents and we have calls – not all our calls are classified as incidents

One incident might generate 40 calls in some cases – so these should be taken into account – so we actually deal with many calls per shift – so I wonder if the politicians know and understand these issues clearly?

25. Apart from their earlier doubts about the resilience of auto-caller-location, the staff questioned whether auto-data transfer to the other emergency service would really be as efficient as assumed:

I see no benefits in auto-transfer of data to the other emergency services because it is effective now to do this orally; and it often needs background explanation and discussion with the other service to inform them effectively. Where is the evidence that auto-transfer is better than the current system?

26. Similarly, others thought that dealing with callers would be less efficient – due to a standardisation of the process:

Pre-written question protocols can be restrictive and simplistic – because different situations and callers have different needs and requirements – and standard question sequences can actually delay things!

27. In this context, some staff thought the only real benefit of the proposals was the potential to save money on staffing costs:

The only obvious benefit is the money saving!

There are clear monetary savings under this proposal.

28. Many more were doubtful even about this and in any case preferred the authorities to pursue an alternative route – for example:

What is the whole cost of the project? What will the £3.6M buy in practice?

Why is the investment and improvement dependent on a joint single Control Centre – why not continue with two separate sub-control centres but still work together? This would allow us to operate as each other's overflow and secondary control

What will happen if one of the authorities vetoes the decision and the proposal does not go ahead? Could we just split the money and go our separate ways? Could we not upgrade ourselves separately with half the money?

Why are you confident that the proposals will be adopted by the two authorities? Is it only because of the savings?

Will the costs escalate and will there be extra money if it does? Is there a plan B if that happens?

If there was no concern about money, would you still go in the same direction?

Other Matters

29. Staff were concerned to point out that the government was not requiring the services to create a Joint Control:

The £1.8M funding was to update the system, but I don't think you had to merge to get the grant funding.

30. There were also worries that the two services might take the initiative as an opportunity to de-skill the Control staff in the context of standardised IT systems and protocols.
31. In terms of implementation, the staff were keen that the Control staff should be involved in planning the transitional arrangements:

The Control staff should be part of the inter-ops alignment planning work – but we seem to be left out of the process so far.

Location

32. Everyone agreed that it was meaningless to count 'votes' on the best location, but when staff were invited to state any relevant considerations, the main comments were

We need a secondary control facility that is closer [to the relevant staff] than the one that is not chosen – so the staff there should not have to travel too far to the secondary base

If the primary Control is in Kidlington, will the secondary control be relocated to the new HQ in Berkshire?

Overall Opinions and Conclusions

33. In both forums, staff were asked for their overall judgements about whether there would be cost and resilience/efficiency benefits and whether, all things considered, the proposal for a Joint Control is reasonable or not. They were also asked for any comments about the criteria that should influence the choice of location for the new Joint Control.
34. In the first forum there was a wide diversity of opinion about whether the Joint Control would achieve significant **cost savings** – with a third saying ‘yes’, a third saying ‘no’ and a third who were ‘don’t knows’. In the second smaller group, the majority were ‘don’t know’ on the question of cost savings (with only one out of eight) saying they would definitely not be achieved. Therefore, most staff were at least open-minded or undecided about whether there would be cost savings, with a third of the larger forum believing savings would be achieved.
35. With respect to whether the Joint Control would deliver **resilience benefits**, the overwhelming majority in the first forum was that it would not: no one was optimistic while 13 felt there were no benefits to be achieved and five said they had no opinion at that stage. In the second forum, half thought there would be no resilience benefits while the other half were ‘don’t knows’. Overall, then, across both forums, the clear majority view was that resilience would not improve in a Joint Control. In fact, across the two forums, no one was optimistic about greater resilience.
36. In terms of whether the proposal for a Joint Control is **reasonable overall**, all things considered, the first forum was almost equally divided between sceptics and those who did not know – but with no one supporting the proposals as reasonable overall. In the second forum, too, no one supported the Joint Control as a reasonable proposal, and most said they were ‘don’t knows’. Overall, then, the forums were divided between those who thought the project unreasonable and those who did not know.

Facilitator’s overall impression

37. Both these forums discussed very sensitive issues that directly affect the employment prospects and terms and conditions of those taking part. Nonetheless, all the participants were thoughtful and reasoned in their approach to the discussion and both sets of staff seemed to appreciate the chance to meet together and engage with the issues of principle in small, mixed round table discussions. While disagreeing with the analyses of the senior staff present (who are managing the project), the forum members were uniformly understanding and appreciative of the answers to their questions and the engagement opportunity. It is not an exaggeration to say that both sets of staff were a credit to their respective FRSS!

Footnote: some sensitive issues

38. The discussions showed that the staff were particularly keen on some practical matters to do with communications and the implementation of any scheme. In the immediate future, they wanted the separate decisions of the two authorities to be communicated to them separately and quickly by an appropriate and sensitive route (though there was no consensus on how the RBFRRS decision should be transmitted on the same evening that the authority meets). Some typical comments were:

Can we have some guarantee that on the 17th July we shall be informed properly of any outcomes? We all need to be told at the same time!

We should be phoned and informed personally of the decision – text can seem too impersonal

We would all like to be either phoned or texted if it is late at night.

39. The staff were all also keen that, if the proposals go ahead, then – whichever base might be chosen for the primary Joint Control Centre – the moving in and setting-up should be handled sensitively so that neither set of staff would feel they were being ‘taken over’ or just moving into the others’ base: that is, they wanted the new Joint Control to seem like a new venture in which ‘everyone is new’ rather than the continuation of routine business in one of the organisations. For example, a typical comment in this context was:

The new Control Centre has to be made to feel like a joint enterprise rather than a take-over by one or the other – you will need good team building days – and it would be best to have joint occupancy at the same time.

40. Finally, they stressed that staff would need guidance and support if their centre was not chosen as the new base:

I hope the staff that do not get the new location as their base will get full support from their FRS and HR with assistance towards thinking about further options.

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