

Report title

Agenda item

**Proposed response to DCLG consultation on the
Future of Fire Service Control Rooms in England and
replacement of our existing mobilising system****9**

Meeting

Finance and Personnel Committee

Authority

Date

15 March 2011

22 March 2011

Report by

Director of Operational Resilience and Training
4 March 2011

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Public

Summary

Members were previously informed of the termination of the FiReControl project (FEP 1665). That report noted the anticipated consultation that DCLG were to undertake on the future of fire and rescue control services in England. That consultation was subsequently issued on the 13th January 2011 with responses required by the 8th April 2011. This report discusses the consultation paper and proposes a response which is at appendix 1.

Members are also aware that the Heads of Terms agreed in principle with DCLG included a commitment from DCLG to provide equipment or fund the reasonable cost of a new mobilising system for LFEPA. This report sets out proposals for that replacement together with an indicative timetable leading to contract award.

Recommendation(s)

That the Finance and Personnel Committee recommend the Authority agrees that –

1. the response to the DCLG consultation on the future of fire and rescues control services in England is approved;
2. the general policy approach, detailed in paragraphs 4-6, be adopted; and
3. That the proposal to commence procurement for a refresh or replacement of the mobilising system is approved. This process to commence immediately and a report to be brought to the Authority for decision no later than March 2012.

Introduction/Background

Response to DCLG Consultation

1. There are eight specific questions asked within the consultation document and the proposed response is at Appendix 1. In tandem with the consultation process DCLG are expecting to enter into discussion with interested FRA's about taking on or retaining the leases of the control centre buildings and discussing how any other legacy assets may be best utilised.
2. From a London perspective we are currently in negotiations with DCLG to enter into an agreement with DCLG in relation to the future use of the building, funding for relocation and for a replacement mobilising system. These negotiations should be complete by the end of March 2011, a verbal update can be provided at the meeting; the response therefore concentrates on the lessons that can be learnt from the project to date and our broader view of the future of control room services.
3. In preparing the response views have been canvassed from all departments that had an involvement with the project. In addition the response also attempts to reflect the broad view of the Authority on the problems that have beset the project.

Authority's general approach to future service provision

4. The Chairman of Finance and Personnel Committee proposes that the Authority adopts the following general approach in respect of service provision
5. As set out in its approved submission (September 2010) to the Government's Fire Futures initiative, the Authority supports the Government's localism agenda. Accordingly, it believes that control of the provision of services should be with the sector itself, with local and fire authorities playing the lead commissioning role. Responsibility for day to day service delivery should then be outsourced wherever possible, in order to drive out further efficiencies.
6. In accordance with the localism agenda, this Authority believes that a full range of options in terms of who provides services - including community organisations, mutual approaches and staff seeking to take responsibility themselves - should then be considered within this context.

Replacement / Refresh of Current Mobilising System

7. Our current system went live in 2004 and was due to be replaced on delivery of the FiReControl project or in 2014. Members are aware that as part of the proposed agreement with DCLG for the Authority taking on the lease to the premises at Merton there was proposed agreement that DCLG would fund the replacement of our current mobilising system. Within this proposed agreement with DCLG a replacement system is described as the core system and not any peripherals that are not directly related to the mobilising function. It was also agreed that where possible we would make use of any equipment that may be available for use following the closure of the project in order to minimise costs.
8. In order to ensure that the Authority obtains maximum benefit from the agreement with DCLG officers consider that the process of finding a supplier for the system supply should be commenced as soon as possible. While we would seek to move to contract award as soon as possible and have a firm basis on which to secure DCLG funding the replacement system itself will need to go through exhaustive development and testing before we would be content to go live with it even if it is just an upgrade of our existing system. Our current supplier, Motorola, have undertaken to support our existing product through to the end of 2014 so we would need to consider that to be an end date although support may be available for longer. It would of course be our intention to bring any new product into service at the earliest possible opportunity in order that we could gain the benefit of the enhanced technology.

9. In seeking a replacement system we would be looking to equal the current capabilities and functionality of the current system in addition we would be looking to introduce similar technologies such as those that were promised by the FiReControl project. Such capabilities would include dynamic mobilising where the nearest appliance, by travel time, would be despatched to an incident irrespective of stations grounds.

Procurement Strategy

10. Work has already commenced to identify our current and future user requirements regarding mobilising systems. We are in discussion with a number of other Fire Authorities regarding the possibility of working in collaboration on the replacement of our respective or perhaps joint systems. Although these discussions are at an early stage there would be clear advantages of such collaborative working such as a single procurement strategy and an easier route towards mutual fall back and resilience arrangements. Any such arrangement that we may enter into will not inhibit or delay the replacement of the London mobilising system.
11. There are three routes to procurement that may be open to us these are, a refresh of our existing system to the latest version, full competitive procurement or mini competition through the Sprint II framework. Each of these is being considered and a decision will be made based upon the ability to deliver a system that meets our requirements in the most cost effective manner.

Resources

12. It is considered that at this time the resources available within the control and communications project Team have the requisite skills, knowledge and expertise to deliver the project within the proposed timescale. Should it be necessary to increase staffing levels due to changing project requirements, i.e. a change to a lead authority or collaborative approach, a further report will be brought to the Authority, however at the present time it is thought unlikely that additional resources will be required but as ever the delivery of such a project will require the co-operation of and support from a large number of departments within the organisation.

Timetable

13. The timetable for delivering a project such as this will very much depend upon the procurement route taken. To go through a full procurement process would clearly take the longest time, a high level plan has been produced and it is considered that on current assumptions it will be possible to get to a position of contract award by Q1 2012. There will then be an extensive period of product development and testing that will be required, a plan to take us from contract award through to go live would be developed later. The deadline for go live will be the end of 2014 when the maintenance of our current system is due to end.

Funding

14. It is anticipated that the cost of the replacement mobilising system will be met by DCLG as part of our agreement to take the lease of the Merton premises, FEP 1665 refers, although the agreement to do so is part of a Memorandum of Understanding with DCLG which is stated as not being legally binding. If there are any additional costs for other equipment or systems it is considered that these can be met from the specific Mobilising System Reserve that has been discussed in the financial comments below. In addition the on going costs of the Control and Communications Project Team will continue at a current cost of £818,971 per annum.

Interim Head of Legal Services Comments

15. The Interim Head of Legal Services has reviewed this report and all comments have been included in the body of the report.

Acting Head of Finance and Contractual Services Comments

16. As a result of CIPFA guidance on the accounting treatment of grants and contributions in 2010/11, Local Authorities are now required to recognise any grant receipts in the year they are received. If the money is not then used in that year a earmarked reserve must be created to hold the unused grant receipts for use in future years. To reflect this change in accounting policy, the money currently shown as deferred grants for this project will be moved to an earmarked reserve on the balance sheet. This will be carried out as part of the closing of accounts which will be reported to members in June 2011.

Environmental Implications

17. There are no environmental implications arising as a direct consequence of this report however an environmental impact assessment will be carried out as part of any procurement process.

Equalities Implications

18. There are no equalities implications arising as a direct consequence of this report however an equalities impact assessment will be carried out as part of any procurement process.

List of Appendices to this report:

1. Draft response to DCLG consultation

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985	
List of background documents	
1. FSC 73/2009	
2. FEP1454 - CLG FiReControl Project	
3. FEP 1413 – CLG Regional FiReControl Project – FiReControl	
4. FEP 916 CLG's Regional Fire Control Room Project – FiReControl and National Radio System Project - Firelink	
5. FEP 843 Finance - LFEP A Budget 2006-07	
6. FEP 785 Control and Communications Project - CLG's Fire Control Room Project – FiReControl	
7. FEP 1542 – FiReControl Update and Proposed Consultation Response	
8. FEP 1566 – CLG FiReControl Project Update	
9. FEP 1589 – CLG FiReControl Project Update	
10. FEP 1665 FiReControl and Occupancy of the Merton RCC	
11. DCLG Consultation on the future of fire and rescue control services in England	
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Appendix 1

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?

We broadly agree with the assessment and offer the following detailed comments.

As early as 2005 the then ODPM Select Committee identified that further slippage with the project was inevitable unless there was rigorous project management and close liaison with stakeholders. The DCLG Select Committee of 2010 into FiReControl concluded that the project had been inadequately planned, poorly executed and badly managed. The committee also identified that relationships with stakeholders had also been mismanaged.

We would fully concur with the comments made by the committee, our officers along with colleagues from other fire authorities have tried to engage DCLG officials in meaningful discussion so that this project could be delivered in partnership. Unfortunately a point was never reached where this was achieved, perhaps this was due to the high levels of staff turnover within the department or simply the lack of experience in managing projects of this nature. Whatever the reason it is clear that the department should not undertake the delivery of such projects in the future. The service itself has a wealth of experience in delivering major projects successfully and the role of central government should be to facilitate but not deliver such projects in the future.

At the commencement of the project insufficient consideration was given at national level to risks and understanding of both their scope and impact, e.g. supplier did not have a functioning mobilising system. It is important to recognise at project initiation what risks exist at the outset and understand both their scope and impact.

Unrealistic timeframes were placed on certain aspects of the work, e.g. work supporting the implementation of station end equipment, in part, due to not fully appreciating and factoring in the impact certain activities would have on associated areas of work. It is important to ensure that activities and their impacts are fully scoped and understood.

FRS's were neither adequately represented nor involved, both in key negotiations and decisions and in day-to-day development, in dealings with suppliers. This led to concerns regarding the projects lack of openness and transparency and in particular that it would not meet the needs of the end users (FRS's), these concerns were never addressed right up to project closure. Ensure that where project collaboration/integration is being considered with other FRS's project scope, direction and deliverables are fully understood and agreed at an early stage.

A common approach between FRS's proved difficult to achieve across the project due to the broad spectrum that was being represented and the constraint that due consideration had to be given to each FRS's Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) with particular respect to call taking, mobilising and operational response, as identified by the select committee this was a symptom of poor planning.

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

It remains critical to have an efficient and resilient system or systems in place in order for the FRS to meet its statutory responsibilities. Resilience can be achieved by many methods. The method chosen by FiReControl was to achieve resilience through high levels of security, both physical within the RCC

premises and technical through IT security. Similar levels of resilience can also be provided by having local systems that are housed in reasonably secure premises that take into account current and anticipated threat levels and having suitable arrangements with one or more FRS to provide an overload and fall back capability.

The DCLG project appeared to take advice on threat levels and security matters from consultants engaged for that purpose, there was a failure to engage with other government departments such as CPNI(Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure) and CESG (The National Technical Authority for Information Assurance) at an early stage, indeed it was the service itself that brought DCLG into contact with these other internal departments when it appeared that the advice being received by the department may not be reflecting the actual risks as understood by those specialist departments within government. Had more impartial advice been sought at an earlier stage the security requirements for the project and in particular the buildings may have been very different and this may have been reflected in the cost of the buildings. We believe that this failing demonstrates that the department lacked the skills to manage complex projects such as this and that this needs to be a consideration when the delivery of any future projects are considered.

The closure of the FiReControl project leaves a gap with regard to the efficient operation of the Fire Service National Co-ordination Centre (FRSNCC), which would have become a data driven service. It will now require continuing staffing resources to operate both in its host brigade and all others supplying it with information. Any legacy arrangements should provide for the provision of data communication between control rooms to transfer information by data in order that staffing efficiencies can be achieved.

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

While the consultation explains the rational behind the resilience requirements of the project it fails to explain why such standards were only being applied to fire service control rooms when the threat level to other emergency service control rooms would have been at least as high as that of the fire service. This demonstrates the failure of the central project team to adequately communicate the rational behind all aspects of the project to their major stakeholders.

This leaves the perception that the response within ODPM, as it was at the time, was not proportionate to the threats that were being faced and that the response was not joined up across government. The result being that we ended up with a project that did not address the question of resilience, enhancing technologies and increased efficiency across the range of emergency service control centres but only on the smallest service and possibly that facing the lowest level of risk.

We agree that a national network of control centres is not the only way of enhancing resilience, indeed the service already had inherent levels of security and resilience through diversity, albeit not an efficient system in many cases. Alternative approaches were available at the time of project initiation, indeed a number of FRS were looking to enter into reciprocal arrangements to boost their fall back arrangements but these were put on hold pending delivery of the FiReControl solution. It must also be remembered that the project direction was influenced heavily by the regionalisation agenda that was being followed by the government at that time.

There have been few major failures of a fire service control room. Every service has always had its own effective, tried and tested business continuity arrangements to ensure that they can continue to carry out their statutory duty.

With regard to the physical security of the RCC buildings we consider that the specification is far in excess of what is required, our reasoning for this is included in our response to question 2.

We acknowledge that there is a residual problem with the ability of existing control rooms to deal with short term high levels of calls. We believe that had FiReControl not been initiated FRA's who were looking to enter into mutual arrangements with others to overcome this problem would have had those arrangements in place long ago. With advances in technology and a will to enter into mutual arrangements with others all FRA's should be able to resolve this problem within their post FiReControl plans but this may require some additional central financial support. In this respect we support the conclusion of the select committee in that future plans should include provision for the maintenance and, where necessary, upgrading of existing control room technology, and CLG should meet the full costs of that to FRA's where it has become necessary as a result of delays in the FiReControl project.

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

We consider that there is a very limited role for central government in supporting technical enhancements in control rooms. The FiReControl project and its failure was, in our opinion, partly due to the fact that a central approach to delivery was taken with a lack of user / FRS engagement. We have made further comment in our response to previous questions and would also refer to the conclusions of the 2010 select committee.

In the short term a number of FRA's will need some financial support from government in order to replace existing systems that may not have had investment in anticipation of the delivery of FiReControl. We support the 'localist' approach and believe that the sector itself is best placed to understand its requirements and is demonstrating that it can work in co-operation between FRA's and other partners using existing bodies such as the LGA or Lead Authorities to deliver cost effective, efficient and resilient systems that will meet local requirements.

Support and funding should be made available to the FRS to develop and deliver strategic alliances that will provide integrated services that will enhance mutual fall back and resilience arrangements between individual or groupings of FRS. We are not suggesting that FiReControl should be replicated but a much simpler but nevertheless effective service could be provided using existing technologies.

Q5 Do you think 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?

We consider that the service itself is best placed to achieve efficiencies in the delivery of control services. We believe that there is a desire within the sector to make efficiencies where possible and to achieve this it will use new technologies and enter into partnerships where this will lead to an improvement in local services.

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.

As set out in its approved submission (September 2010) to the Government's Fire Futures initiative, the Authority supports the Government's localism agenda. Accordingly, it believes that control of the

provision of services should be with the sector itself, with local and fire authorities playing the lead commissioning role. Responsibility for day to day service delivery should then be outsourced wherever possible, in order to drive out further efficiencies.

In accordance with the localism agenda, this Authority believes that a full range of options in terms of who provides services - including community organisations, mutual approaches and staff seeking to take responsibility themselves - should then be considered within this context.

As such, LFEPA's preferred option is for the sector to be given full control and to then seek to operate the Control service through a contractual arrangement as soon as possible thereafter.

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 they are presented?

While we accept that the service has continued to receive funding to maintain existing control rooms during the period of the FiReControl project each service will be in a different position with regard to the viability of existing systems. Therefore levels of support to individual FRA's will depend on the viability of their current systems. We agree that funding provided should support those FRA's and in particular those that intend to replace control systems in co-operation with others working towards shared services where efficiencies can be demonstrated. We agree with the departments thinking with regard to the order of priorities.

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.

While this question has limited relevance to London as we have an integrated data solution our expectation is that with the demise of the FiReControl project those elements, such as the availability of mobile data and control room integration that were removed as Firelink deliverables and incorporated into FiReControl will now be placed back with Firelink and delivered. We understand that what this will look like will be dependant upon the future collaboration that may take place between services, however the delivery of a full data solution integrated into control rooms will allow for the greatest efficiencies to be realised.