

WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

28 MARCH 2011

1. **DCLG CONSULTATION DOCUMENT – “THE FUTURE OF FIRE & RESCUE CONTROL SERVICES IN ENGLAND”**

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

RECOMMENDED

THAT the proposed response to the Department for Local Communities and Government (DCLG) consultation document “The Future of Fire and Rescue Control Services in England” be noted and agreed.

2. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 2.1 This report is submitted to inform Members of the proposed response from the West Midlands Fire Service to the consultation document described above.
- 2.2 The report is brought to the Executive Committee because; in the opinion of the Clerk and Monitoring Officer, the matter cannot reasonably be delayed until the next ordinary meeting of the Authority because a response is required by DCLG by 8th April 2011.

3. **BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 On 20 December 2011 the Fire Minister announced the closure of the national FiReControl project.
- 3.2 In recognition of the various states of Fire Control provision across the nation, a DCLG consultation was launched on 13 January 2011. The purpose of this consultation can broadly be summarised as:
- To agree the key priorities for Fire and Rescue Services in moving forwards following the project closure.

- To describe the Government's approach to the usage of funding which is remaining following the closure of the project.
- To seek to learn the lessons from the FiReControl project.

3.3 The consultation document invites views from across the Fire and Rescue Service sector, and is aimed primarily at members of Fire and Rescue Authorities, Fire and Rescue Services and their representative bodies. It also notes the interest of suppliers within the Fire and Rescue industry.

3.4 The consultation document requires response by 8th April 2011. For this reason the report is being brought to the Executive Committee as an urgent matter which cannot be delayed until the next meeting of the Authority, in accordance with its terms of reference. The document has been made available to all Members via the CMIS website. An update on the proposed response was given to Members at the Policy Planning Forum on 14 March 2011, Members views were invited at this stage.

3.6 Officers from this service have compiled the proposed response which is attached as Appendix A.

4. **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

In preparing this report an initial Equality Impact Assessment is not required and has not been carried out. The matters contained in this report do not relate to a policy change.

5. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct legal implications.

6. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

DCLG Consultation Document.

VIJ RANDENIYA
CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

APPENDIX A

Response to the DCLG Consultation document “The future of Fire and Rescue Control Services in England” – West Midlands Fire Service

Topic of the consultation

The future arrangement of Fire & Rescue Control services in England following the decision to close down the FiReControl project.

Scope of the consultation

The consultation invites views from the Fire & Rescue sector on whether resilience, technology and efficiency are the right priorities to shape control services in the future and presents four different approaches for delivering change based upon the Coalition Governments decentralisation policy. The consultation asks about Fire & Rescue Service priorities for upgrading control services and explains that the amount of central funding available for this will be linked to decisions taken by Fire & Rescue Authorities on the use of the buildings and other assets procured for FiReControl. The consultation also asks what lessons we can learn from FiReControl.

The consultation is aimed primarily at members of Fire & Rescue Authorities, Fire & Rescue Services and their representative bodies. Suppliers in the Fire & Rescue industry will also have an interest.

Body responsible for the consultation

The consultation is being facilitated by the Fire and Resilience Directorate within the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Key Information

This response has been produced by officers of the West Midlands Fire Service, and has subsequently been endorsed by the Executive Committee of the West Midlands Fire & Rescue Authority.

The West Midlands Fire Service is metropolitan service covering an area of approximately 92 000 hectares, and serving a population approaching 2.5 million people. The service has its own well established Fire Control provision and has the scope and desire to develop collaborative working with other Fire & Rescue Services. West Midlands Fire Service procured a new Command & Control system which went live in 2008.

Format of Response

In keeping with Appendix E of the consultation document this response has been structured around the 8 key questions posed by the authors of the consultation document.

As many of the questions refer to the Consultation document, a full text copy is available by clicking [here](#)

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.

Yes, the areas identified are agreed to be the key lessons to be drawn from the FiReControl project.

The extended timeframe in particular meant that the identified IT solution was significantly 'out of date' by the time that the project was closed, notwithstanding the fact that there was a still yet undetermined period of time prior to actual 'go live'. Fire & Rescue services such as West Midlands Fire Service were able to evidence actual use of all of the key benefits identified in the Regional Full Business Case¹ some 18 months prior to the project closure.

It is also important to note that the degree of project imposition upon individual services was such that practitioners had little or no input into the concept and design phase of the project and as such there was little buy in or support. There was unlikely to be a common view across the sector as the needs and extant provision of each individual FRS was so diverse, and remains so.

The project developed numerous political implications and issues outside of the core business decision as time progressed. A principal concern developed around the costs attributable to the project as individual FRSs faced their own budget challenges.

A significant lesson to be learnt is in the recognition of the time from 'flash to bang' of significant IT projects such as FiReControl where the pace of technological change readily outstrips the speed of delivery. The original concept can appear dated within a relatively short period of time.

References

1. p20 – The FiReControl Business Case Part 1 – Regional Case for West Midlands

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?

This service would support the Governments view that resilience can be achieved in ways other than the development of a national network of control centres. The speed of development of network technology, linked to the scope for the development of national data exchange standards, means that a similar resilient effect can be achieved by more locally delivered means.

All Fire & Rescue Services are currently seeking to maximise efficiency savings and many, including WMFS, will seek to exploit the use of Information Technology in achieving this.

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

Many issues of service resilience should be the subject of organisational business continuity plans as required under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. These plans should ordinarily include those issues based upon the non availability of staff (pandemic, industrial action etc), and the integrity of the control building and ICT infrastructure.

The sector would benefit from the setting of a realistic and achievable set of expectations against which control room resilience could be benchmarked. This service would contend that the standard set in respect of the Regional Control Centre buildings was unrealistically high when matched against the actual threat.

The focus for central direction should give regard to those issues when a service becomes overwhelmed by some extraordinary event, which may be defined as those events which require the mobilisation of either regional or national assets in support of the local response.

The sector could also enjoy increased resilience if nationally developed standards and Service Level Agreements were in place in the following areas:

- Formal arrangements for call handling should one single event, or combination of simultaneous events, generate a high call demand which cannot be handled by a single FRS control facility. Arrangements developed on a relatively ad-hoc basis with telephone network providers during the 2007 flooding events have proven the concept that a FRS remote from that which is affected can call handle, sift, prioritise and communicate with the 'home' control. The Case Study (1) embedded within Section 4 highlights this issue, and alludes to the need for more resilience in such arrangements. This service would support that view.
- This service would also seek to explore the prospect of providing enhanced staffing resilience for periods of peak call demand by utilising alternative crewing methods.

- The ongoing implementation of the Firelink provision will also support the mobilisation of regional and national resources in the event of a major incident. This service would implore the government to complete those projects linked to the provision of a fully embedded Airwave provision for ALL FRS.

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?

Yes, many services have not invested in control room technology during the life cycle of the FiReControl project in expectation of a provided solution. The timing of the project closure set against budget reductions will provide services with a significant challenge, and may possibly affect their ability to deliver effective services.

Whilst services such as WMFS have invested in new Command & Control technology, other items were not developed or procured in line with expectations over project delivery as previously discussed. These would, for example, include the full integration of Airwave and telephone technology to provide the most effective communication arrangements.

The role of central government should be to facilitate such upgrades to a common, minimum, standard and provide funding support based upon arrangements described within the scope of this consultation, particularly where collaborative opportunities are identified.

We also note that the project was due to deliver a common standard of Station End Equipment and Mobile Data Terminal across the sector. In terms of interoperability and resilience this should be considered in terms of the setting of national standards, or provision if funding allows.

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?

Individual FRS should seek to drive their own control services efficiency agenda, in common with other areas of service delivery and support. Services are best placed to understand their own risk profile and provide an appropriate service to manage this. It should be recognised that individual FRS will also make use of their control room facility for many other activities based around call handling and associated tasks which may, in turn, lead to greater efficiency within other areas of those organisations.

The most significant efficiencies which may be realised in respect of control service provision are likely to come from collaborative arrangements between 2 or more FRS. Central government should promote and incentivise this approach, primarily by funding, and technological support where innovative collaborative opportunities are identified.

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.

This service supports the local provision of control services, delivered against a nationally agreed minimum standard of resilience and inter-operability. WMFS supports collaborative arrangements with other FRS and believes that the development of natural synergies should be the primary driver for such arrangements as opposed to rigidly imposed expectations. Services that choose not to enter into collaborative arrangements should be publicly accountable for their reasons in not doing so.

WMFS believes that we are best placed to design and deliver the service required by the risk profile which we manage, and the needs of our community and staff. The WMFS seeks to be flexible and innovative in the delivery of services and enjoys the freedoms supported by managing our own Fire Control.

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?

Yes, this service would support the funding priorities identified in Section 6 and would support the order of presentation in Para 6.13.

WMFS seeks to emphasise the need to complete the installation of Firelink, and the removal of existing interim provision, but would also seek central government support in respect of the contractual arrangements with the service provider which is predicated on the use of 'data' and not 'voice' by the FiReControl network. Early analysis of likely costs based upon existing voice traffic indicates significant funding issues for this service.

Q8 – Which of the options for Firelink (Annex C) would best meet Fire and Rescue service needs? Please give reasons for your choice.

This service supports Option 3.

The existing interim solution is neither sustainable, nor does it offer efficient and effective working practices.

This service has declared that it has no interest in occupying the Regional Control Centre building in common with regional partners.

We believe that a fully integrated communications solution to include Firelink, telephony and data integration to the Command & Control system is essential to the delivery of an effective and efficient service.