



**GREATER MANCHESTER
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

**Greater Manchester
Fire and Rescue Service**

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Dear Sirs,

Future of Fire & Rescue Control Services

Thank you for seeking our view on the Future of Fire & Rescue Control Services. As a Fire and Rescue Service, this is an important consultation for us to participate and contribute towards.

To aid your analysis, we have separated each of our comments into the specific questions that you raise in your consultation document. However, initially we have outlined some of the aspects that we feel require a specific mention.

Sections 1, 2 & 3 - Introduction and Background to FiReControl Project and Lessons from FiReControl;

Paragraph 2.7 of the consultation document states –

An important point to note is that the Government expects no immediate implications for public safety resulting from the decision to cancel the FiReControl project and the public will experience no degradation in the service they have been receiving. The statutory responsibility for responding to emergency calls rests with the individual fire and rescue authorities under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. The authorities receive funding for this purpose through a combination of central grant and locally raised taxes. The fire and rescue authorities have maintained their current control room services in good order during the period of the FiReControl project, and continue to do so. We expect that the authorities and their fire and rescue services will wish to undertake a comprehensive review of their current control arrangements in the light of the decision to cancel the FiReControl project.

We considers that this assertion merits specific comment.

1. Government itself has previously recognised that delays in delivering the national project created risks for a number of existing old fire control systems and, in fact, made payments to a number of fire and rescue authorities to ensure their existing systems remained viable.
 2. It follows that the next layer or group of control facilities which have not been upgraded will be increasingly fragile.
- We request sight of the evidence or risk assessment that supports the assertion in paragraph 2.7

Q1. Do you agree with this assessment? What lessons do you think we can learn from FiReControl – both positive and negative?

We do not agree that 'large scale' IT Projects are an issue per se. Rather, the issues pivot around ambiguous governance, managing unrealistic expectations and then delivering as quickly as possible with a clear sense of ownership. Project delays inevitably mean that technology evolves quickly and in many cases, if not progressed swiftly, renders the original requirements obsolete.

In this project there was a multitude of stakeholders. There was a lack of a clear technical specification or concept of operations at the outset, which was recognised in the National Audit Office report to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee. There were also multiple layers in the governance structure and a significant turnover of senior staff within CLG who were directly responsible for project delivery, leading to confusion and ambiguity in terms of who was responsible for what.

The prime contractor EADS (latterly Cassidian) had not undertaken a project of this nature before.

We agree that there has been a lack of involvement in major aspects of the project, such as the procurement of the buildings. This has resulted in massively over specified assets, with long term financial liabilities and little ability to break the leases.

Lack of engagement arising from and leading to further lack of trust and 'buy in', even though the fire and rescue service co-operated fully as acknowledged in paragraph 3.7 of the Consultation.

We agree with the comment at paragraph 3.8 of the Consultation that it was difficult if not impossible to agree a common approach that satisfied everyone. The regional approach was an impediment in some areas but not all.

Section 4 – Defining the policy objectives

Section 4 seeks to remind us that the policy objectives for FiReControl were –

- improving resilience,
- enhancing technology and
- increasing efficiency.

This is a misleading section as one of the original and central tenets of the Project was the regionalisation of the Fire and Rescue Service. This was explicit at the inception of the Project and articulated in the Regional White Paper at the time.

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?

Resilience

For emergency planning purposes, the Government publishes an assessment of risks facing the UK in the National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies. Many of these risks have the potential to disrupt the essential work of fire and rescue control rooms, for example:

- pandemic disease affecting control room staff
- severe weather or inland flooding, leading to extreme volumes of calls or affecting control rooms directly
- major industrial accidents or technical failures causing disruption to telecommunications, electricity supplies or water and sewerage systems
- attacks on infrastructure, including cyber attacks.

We consider that the issue of resilience remains as important. Indeed, events in Japan in recent weeks illustrate very vividly the risks posed by natural disasters, let alone terrorist attacks. We are required to have regard to national risk assessments as they are part of business continuity arrangements.

Enhancing Technology and Efficiency

We consider that efficiency is paramount given the financial climate. The investment in enhanced technology can help deliver as good, if not better, service by investing in appropriate, proven technologies.

However, it is unclear whether existing control facilities are deemed to be part of the critical national infrastructure, which was the status being given to the new facilities. It is important to understand this requirement as this may result in FRAs incurring additional costs. The important question is who should bear these costs legally as the Authority's statutory duty is confined to the area of Greater Manchester?

This then poses a further question, what is the role of Government in national co-ordination and how will this be prescribed, at a time of fundamental shift to localism?

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

We consider that resilience in the ability to deal with high volumes of calls, such that calls are not 'lost', and resilience in terms of the availability of people are the most important aspects.

All our business continuity plans recognise 'people' risk, whether relating to absence due to pandemic disease or industrial relations issues.

The physical security of the building at Lingley Mere (the new facility) includes double fencing zones, a guard house, trembler sensors on fences, underground sensors. If control facilities are not part of the critical national infrastructure these features may be regarded as excessive and costly.

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?

We consider that there must be a role for central government. The origins of regional controls, as mentioned, were about regionalisation, a public policy that was subsequently dropped. Nevertheless, the public policy requirement of being able to deploy emergency services to incidents on a national scale remains. The acceptance of this national context was contained in the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework and the position that Fire and Rescue Authorities now find themselves in i.e. requiring replacement or refreshed technology, is as a direct result. We consider that central government should support Fire and Rescue Authorities in the allocation of capital grant to undertake the technology refresh, as it is a national duty to protect citizens from major disasters and/or terrorist attacks.

Looking further ahead, central government should continue to have a role in relation to making national procurement framework agreements available to Fire and Rescue Authorities.

Q5 Do you think that there is a role for central government in helping fire and rescue authorities achieve greater efficiencies in the delivery of control services – and, if so, what should this be?

We consider that Fire and Rescue Authorities should have the freedoms and flexibilities to decide service delivery. Otherwise we will encounter the same or similar difficulties as in the FiReControl project.

There is however the issue of responsibility for national resilience which remains to be addressed and government's role should be to set frameworks, standards and expectations.

Section 5 – Central Government Support

Q6 Which of the approaches (or combination of approaches) for the delivery of control services, set out in this section, would provide the best outcome for the fire and rescue community and the public?

We considers that a collaborative approach has the potential to deliver enhanced resilience and major efficiencies but still has its challenges. There has to be some central government support, and there have to be significant benefits to make the proposition attractive enough for this step change to occur. Given the pressure to deliver cashable efficiencies that local government and the fire and rescue service are required to make in the wider financial setting, there is a risk that authorities will become insular in their thinking.

Section 6 – Funding Choices

Q7 Do you agree that these are the right funding priorities and do you have any comments on the order in which these are presented?

The wasted expenditure is regrettable, and it will fetter the fire and rescue service's ability to procure suitable alternative solutions. The liabilities associated with the buildings are not our priority.

We agree that Firelink should be completed as a matter of priority. The longer the debate continues, the longer it will be before the service receives the operational benefits, including issues such as operational intelligence for fire-fighter safety.

We support the principle of shared controls but this is subject to seeing and agreeing the detail of any arrangements.

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.

We consider that Option 3 is the best option as this achieves the enhanced fire-fighter safety that the contract was meant to deliver.

If you would like clarification about any aspect of this consultation response, please contact Rachel Stanley, Consultation and Engagement Officer on stanleyr@manchesterfire.gov.uk or 0161 6084169.

Yours sincerely,



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COUNTY FIRE OFFICER AND CHIEF
EXECUTIVE

GREATER MANCHESTER FIRE AND
RESCUE SERVICE



Councillor Paul Shannon
CHAIRMAN

GREATER MANCHESTER FIRE AND
RESCUE AUTHORITY