

MEETING: 28 MARCH 2011

SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF FIRE AND RESCUE CONTROL SERVICE IN ENGLAND

JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER, CLERK TO THE AUTHORITY, THE FINANCE OFFICER AND PERSONNEL ADVISOR

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Further to the cancellation of the FiReControl project the Fire Minister, Bob Neill MP, announced the commencement of a consultation paper on the future of fire control services in England. This report appraises Members of the content of the consultation paper and proposes a draft response for consideration.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The cancellation of the FiReControl project in December 2010 means that, at present, there is no single strategy in place for the replacement of Fire and Rescue Service control rooms.
- 2.2 Accordingly, the government has launched a consultation exercise in order to ascertain how to progress the matter, including how any limited funding available for Fire and Rescue Authorities should be prioritised. This consultation exercise is scheduled to run for approximately twelve weeks with responses required by the 8th April 2011.

3 CONSULTATION OVERVIEW

- 3.1 The consultation document is divided into six sections and views are invited on the content from members of the fire and rescue community as well any other interested parties. Ministers expect to make an announcement on the way forward shortly after the end of the consultation process. The specific sections of the report are set out below:
- Introduction
 - Background to the FiReControl project
 - Lessons learnt from the project
 - Defining policy objectives
 - Central government support
 - Funding choices
- 3.2 Sections One and Two of the document set out the purpose of the consultation exercise and the background to the FiReControl project together with the legacy that the project leaves behind. In particular, reference is made to the fact that, whilst the project failed to deliver the technology necessary to ensure a resilient network of nine regional control centres, progress was made in some areas,

particularly in the development of operating protocols and common ways of working. The government's view is that it is important to make sure that this legacy is not overlooked, and that the fire and rescue community is able to benefit from this investment.

- 3.3 Section Three considers the lessons that can be drawn from the FiReControl project. Whilst the project was cancelled because of delays to the main IT system the government's view is that there are additional lessons to be learnt from it. Some relate to the early decisions taken by DCLG, especially around the design and build of the control centre buildings, with further key issues associated with the relationship between DCLG and the Fire and Rescue Service community which, in the early days, left a great deal to be desired. It is proposed that these issues should be reflected upon in order to inform future decisions and working relationships and the paper invites comment in this respect.
- 3.4 Section Four of the document considers whether the policy objectives which led to FiReControl are the right issues to shape decisions on the future of control services in England and requests that all interested parties also give this matter their consideration.
- 3.5 The policy objectives of the FiReControl project and governments' position with regard to them, are set out as follows:
- **Improved Resilience** – the view of the current government is that this remains an important objective but that there are now alternative approaches which could provide a more proportionate and affordable solution than the original concept of a fully networked national solution.
 - **Enhanced technology** – This aim continues to be supported but the point is also emphasised that many Fire and Rescue Services have continued to develop their technology systems during the past six years and so many of the features that FiReControl would have introduced are already widely available.
 - **Improved Efficiency** – This continues to be of great importance. With the demise of the project and in view of the current financial pressures, fire and rescue authorities should be looking for innovative ways to reduce the cost of their control service therefore this remains a key area for consideration.
- 3.6 Section Five introduces the concept of localism and considers alternative scenarios for the replacement and delivery of control services. Whilst noting the key aims set out in Section Four of the document, the government believes that its own contribution should be limited to areas where it can add value and where its role really cannot be devolved to others.
- 3.7 To this end the document invites interested parties to consider the extent to which the government should be involved in the provision of control services against four general scenarios as follows:
- A system of local controls rooms without any central intervention or financial support

- The development of a common set of national standards
 - Greater collaboration between Fire and Rescue Authorities with some central support
 - A standard networked solution.
- 3.8 These scenarios are not mutually exclusive and different elements may be combined. The document indicates that the preferred approach of government would be to provide some financial support to help Fire and Rescue Authorities improve their existing control services and, where practicable, also make use of FiReControl legacy assets.
- 3.9 Views are sought on whether this approach offers the best way forward for fire and rescue control services and whether other approaches (or elements of other approaches – such as the adoption of common standards) also have merit.
- 3.10 Section Six explores the funding choices available and invites views on how these should be prioritised. It is not yet known how much funding from central government will be available. However, it should be recognised that this will be limited and that funding will need to be distributed over a number of years.
- 3.11 Overall, there are eight specific questions related to the six sections contained within the consultation paper to which the Chief Fire Officer seeks permission to respond on behalf of the Authority and a draft response is attached at Appendix A for the consideration by and approval of Members.

4 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 A risk assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the risk to the Authority has been minimised as far as practicable. The assessment has considered an appropriate balance between risk and control; the realisation of efficiencies; the most appropriate use of limited resources; and a comprehensive evaluation of the benefits. The risk to the Authority has been assessed as medium utilising the standard risk matrix based on control measures being in place. The complete risk assessment is available on request from the Chief Fire Officer.

5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Clearly there are likely to be financial implications as the Authority will need to replace the mobilising and resource management system, currently located at Newcastle West Community Fire Station, by 2014. The Chief Fire Officer is undertaking research in order to determine the estimated cost of a replacement of the mobilising system.
- 5.2 In addition, a further paper is included on today's agenda which provides Members with a set of indicative cost options relating to three different methods of providing command and control services.

6 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no equality and fairness implications in respect of this report.

7 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no health and safety implications in respect of this report.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 The Authority is recommended to:

- a) Consider and approve the response to the consultation;
- b) Receive further reports as appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The under mentioned Background Papers refer to the subject matter of the above report:

- The future of fire and rescue control service in England – 13th January 2011