



FiReControl and the regionalisation of the Fire Service

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The FiReControl project, involving the closure of local fire control rooms and the establishment of 9 regional control rooms, has been highly controversial.

In opposition the Conservatives and some Liberal Democrats called for the programme to be scrapped. The Coalition Government is currently reviewing the policy.

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1 Introduction

The FiReControl project is part of the Labour Government's Fire and Resilience Programme that sought wider reform of the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). It involved closing the current 46 control centres and replacing them with 9 large regional centres. The project was announced at the end of 2003 and the *Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004* provided the legislative basis. At present, control centres work within local authority boundaries; the regional centres would cover regions chosen for fire service reasons and would be run by bespoke 'fire control companies' controlled by local fire authorities.

The objectives were to improve efficiency by making better use of manpower and eliminating small control rooms, and to improve the ability of the fire service to cope with either a very large fire or a major terrorist incident. Other disaster and emergency preparedness arrangements are generally organised regionally through the Government Offices of the Regions and policy is to share specialist fire fighting and rescue expertise regionally.

The Department for Communities and Local Government listed the following benefits of FiReControl:

Caller identification location technology - the location a call is coming from will be identified automatically, screening hoax calls and saving valuable time.

Satellite positioning equipment - will monitor the whereabouts of each vehicle and the equipment it carries and tell the [Regional Control Centre (RCC)] whether it is the best resource for a particular incident.

Mobile data terminals - will be installed in cabs so firefighters have constantly updated information (including maps and hydrant locations).

Networked solution - the FiReControl network will make sure each RCC is able to provide automatic back-up if one region is too busy or unable to operate. The use of one common control system and procedures will enable FRSs to work together more effectively.

Accommodation - the RCC locations and the building designs adhere to strict security and resilience standards.¹

In July 2005, the Minister Jim Fitzpatrick was asked for the evidence for the statement that incident response times will be improved by the regionalisation of control rooms. His reply included the following:

Under the FiReControl proposals control staff will have the most modern technology which shows on their screens the availability of the most suitable available appliance nearest to the incident, whether it is in the station or not, and will mobilise direct to that appliance. In most fire and rescue services in England, appliances are currently assumed to be at the fire station when mobilised. The new arrangements will take into account the disposition of appliances under an authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan, and optimise the response. The information transmitted direct to the appliance will enable better, faster route planning, and will include water supply information and premises risk data to ensure crews are better-prepared to deal with the incident on arrival.

¹ [The case for FiReControl](#), Department for Communities and Local Government, on 14 July 2010

The location of callers will be identified automatically, even if the caller is ringing from a mobile phone, and detailed information about the location of the caller will be available on screen to the operator. This will improve call-handling by enabling the control operator speedily to validate information given by the caller and focus on handling any distress. These two factors combined are expected to reduce response times from the point of call to the point of attendance at the incident.²

2 Background to the regionalisation programme

The Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) has been the subject of numerous reports and reviews, all calling for significant reforms.

In 1999, the Government carried out a review of fire control rooms, resulting in April 2000 in the Mott McDonald report, *The Future of the Fire Service Control Rooms and communications in England and Wales*,³ on behalf of the Home Office. That report which decided that an optimum arrangement for fire and rescue service control rooms would be 9 regional rooms, but recommended only a reduction to 21 control rooms. Although not ideal, it was felt that this was achievable within the then current constraints. The report was updated in 2003,⁴ and the compromise recommendation for 21 control rooms was dropped in favour of the original report's 'optimal' 9.

In December 2002, Sir George Bain published the results of another review of the fire service. The report, '*The Future of the Fire Service: Reducing Risk, Saving Lives*',⁵ found that:

Notwithstanding the clear recipes for change which came from earlier studies, it was equally clear that progress had been disappointingly small. There are many reasons for this, but most important is that there has been a lack of leadership throughout the service at the political, institutional and operational levels.⁶

The report recommended the amalgamation of control rooms.

The HM Fire Service Inspectorate Report (HMFSI) *Analysis of the Best Value Reviews (BVRs) of Control and Communications* examined the 47 reviews submitted by fire brigades, and found little willingness by fire brigades to collaborate with each other. The report agreed with earlier reports' findings that considerable improvements in national resilience and efficiency could be achieved by creating a national network of nine regional fire control centres (including London) in place of the existing 46 control rooms.⁷

The Government published a White Paper, *Our Fire and Rescue Service*, (Cm 5808) on 30 June 2003. The Deputy Prime Minister's statement stressed his aim to reform the fire service, in line with the recommendations of the Bain Review. He wanted the service to be more proactive in preventing fires; to have more effective institutions; and to be more effectively led and managed so as to be better able to adapt to change, in order to save lives and reduce injuries. He stressed six main themes in the White Paper:

² HC Deb 21 July 2005 c2089W

³ *The Future of the Fire Service Control Rooms and communications in England and Wales*

⁴ *The Future of Fire and Rescue Service Control Rooms in England and Wales: Update 2003*, ODPM, 2003

⁵ *The Future of the Fire Service: reducing risk, saving lives*, The Independent Review of the Fire Service, December 2002

⁶ *The Future of the Fire Service: reducing risk, saving lives*, *ibid*, piii

⁷ HM Fire Service Inspectorate, *Analysis of the Best Value Reviews of Control and Communications*, November 2003

- First, it explains the new emphasis of the service on the prevention of fires and other emergencies as well as on firefighting... We will also make changes so that fire authorities will ensure a better allocation of resources on the basis of risk...
- Secondly, the White Paper sets out our proposals for a more coherent regional approach to fire and rescue...
- Thirdly, the White Paper sets out the institutional changes that we will make to improve the management of the service...
- Fourthly, the White Paper sets out our plans for improved scrutiny and inspection. In line with Bain's advice we are working with the Audit Commission to develop its role in inspecting and reporting on the work of the service...
- Fifthly, the White Paper sets out changes to reform the machinery for negotiating pay and conditions...
- Finally, the White Paper sets out our proposals for modernising the personnel management arrangements of the service...⁸

The measures were set out in the 2005/06 *Fire & Rescue Service National Framework Documents*. The latest framework document (2008-2011) gave an overview of progress to date but stressed that the ultimate decision on when to transfer to the new control centres rests with Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRA).⁹

3 2004 Select Committee report

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Select Committee reported on the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) in January 2004, and cast some doubt on the policy of regionalisation. The report found that the main grounds for the reform seemed to be cost, and that the Government had not made clear how the reforms would improve public safety or reduce bureaucratic overheads. It also cast doubt on whether the regionalisation should be imposed on local FSA. Many witnesses to the inquiry complained of a lack of clarity and openness in the Government's plans.¹⁰

4 Announcement of the location of the Regional Centres, 2005

The location of eight of the nine the regional centres were announced on 11 August 2005:

- * Belmont Business Park, Durham
- * Lingley Mere Business Park, Great Sankey, Warrington, Cheshire
- * Cambridge Research Park, Cambridge
- * Willow Farm Business Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire
- * Wolverhampton Business Park, Wolverhampton
- * Paragon Business Village, Wakefield, West Yorkshire
- * Blackbrook Business Park, Taunton, Somerset.¹¹

The announcement that the South East Regional Centre would be based in Hampshire was made in a Written Statement on 11 October 2005.¹²

⁸ HC Deb 30 June 2003 cc 21-24

⁹ [The Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2008-11](#), DCLG, 2008

¹⁰ ODPM Committee, [The Fire Service](#), January 2004, HC 43 2003-04

¹¹ New Fire Control Centre Locations Announced, ODPM Press Notice , 10 August 2005

¹² HC Deb 11 October 2005 c20WS

5 2006 Select Committee report

The ODPM Committee reported again on the FRS on 5 June 2006.¹³ The 2006 report found that the ODPM had sent mixed messages about its 'inconsistent' policy for regionalisation and recommended that further regionalisation should not take place without wide consultation and clear justification of its aims. The report expressed worries about the technology required for the programme and sharply criticised the lack of information:

The fact that the FRS has not been given enough information about the detail, particularly the financial detail, of FiReControl, is at the heart of the opposition to the project. The absence of information means that fire authorities and representative bodies cannot give unqualified support as they are unconvinced that the aims of enhanced resilience and efficiency will be achieved.¹⁴

The Committee reported that the biggest risk to the project was the opposition to it from the Fire and Rescue Service itself.

6 View of the Fire Service

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) opposed the whole reform project and continued to oppose the mergers to form regional control centres. FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack said:

The Government accepts this plan could lead to cuts in frontline fire services and push up council tax. They also accept there is a "high risk" the project will be a complete failure because of the Government's appalling track record in technology projects. A vast amount of money desperately needed for frontline services will be diverted to a technology project which won't save a single life. This is an enormous gamble with lives and public money. The union and large numbers of MPs are calling for an independent assessment of these plans before they are allowed to proceed any further. The Government needs to listen to those who work in the fire service.¹⁵

The FBU's response to the original Mott McDonald proposals, contained in a report entitled *Out of control*, said that the concept that fewer control centres would be more resilient in case of a large disaster was 'flawed'.¹⁶ It also questioned the report's assumptions about service delivery and value for money and recommended building on the existing structure, using joint procurement and improving liaison between fire authorities.

The FBU was also sceptical about the government's ability to deliver an effective IT system. It presented an IT Background analysis on its website.¹⁷

The Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) adopted a more supportive approach:

The government's 'FiReControl' project which aims to deliver a network of nine regional fire and rescue control centres is considered to be a significant step in improving fire and rescue resilience. CFOA recognises that this project amounts to a substantial investment in the fire and rescue service across England. The Association supports the project on the basis that it will bring to all FRSs a level of service currently enjoyed

¹³ ODPM Committee, *The Fire and Rescue Service*, HC 872-I, 2005-06

¹⁴ ODPM Committee, *The Fire and Rescue Service*, *ibid*, Conclusions and recommendations

¹⁵ FBU Press Release, *Fire crews take campaign to stop the closure of emergency fire control rooms to the TUC*, 12 September 2005

¹⁶ *Out of Control, The Fire Brigades Union response to the Mott MacDonald Report - the Future of the Fire and Rescue Service Control Rooms in England and Wales*, FBU, 2003

¹⁷ *FiReControl Project: IT background analysis*, FBU, January 2005

only by those who operate the best performing control centres and provided that ongoing funding for the solution is both adequate and fairly apportioned.¹⁸

However, the CFOA had reservations, calling for:

- long-term FRS involvement in governance,
- care in transferring staff to the new centres,
- more information to be made available to FRSSs,
- the project to be based on sufficient capacity estimates and adequate funding and
- assurances that the information technology will be up to the job.¹⁹

The CFOA welcomed the postponement by nine months of the target for finishing the project, announced in November 2008, saying it would end uncertainty. It also welcomed the higher level of financial details provided in part 2 of the business case released at the same time.

7 Costs

Much of the criticism of the project focussed on a supposed lack of openness about costs. Detailed financial information on which the business case was based was not initially disclosed and, by summer 2005, only the Chairs of Regional Management Boards had seen them.

The Government estimated that the plan would yield considerable savings that could be ploughed back into FRS and community fire safety and therefore reduce the costs of the system.²⁰ The overall cost of the project increased from £340 million in 2007 to £420 million in 2009.²¹

8 Personnel issues

Staffing numbers will be reduced overall. It is not certain at this stage how many existing control room posts will be lost; estimates vary from between 600-900 out of a total of 15,000 control staff. Concerns have been expressed by unions representing fire control staff, particularly with respect to the need to transfer calls in the event of local call saturation. The Government stated that the recommended staffing numbers will be based on the busiest time of the busiest days, and will have capacity to cope with surges in demand.

9 2010 Select Committee report—qualified support for FiReControl

The Communities and Local Government Select Committee published an update report on the project in April 2010. It set out the multitude of problems associated with the project, but gave qualified support for its continuation:

The primary purpose of the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is the prompt and efficient mobilisation of firefighters in response to a fire or other related incident, in order to save lives and protect property.

¹⁸ [Policy line on FiReControl](#), Chief Fire Officers' Association web page [10 July 2009]

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ HC Deb 6 May 2009 c15-6WS

²¹ Communities and Local Government Committee, *FiReControl*, 1 April 2010, HC 352

The aim of the FiReControl project is to enable this critical function to be carried out with greater speed, responsiveness and efficiency: it proposes to replace the existing 46 local FRS control rooms with nine purpose-built Regional Control Centres (RCCs). These centres will handle emergency 999 calls, mobilise resources and support the management of incidents, underpinned by a resilient network technology.

The FiReControl project is part of a key strategic objective of the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), but its current status is precarious. CLG and the main IT contractor, EADS, have had an adversarial relationship. They do not have a revised contract and there is no currently agreed project plan; until recently, there has been a lack of consultation and collaboration between CLG, EADS and those intimately involved in the Fire and Rescue Services (and some criticise the standard of the present consultation). Project management has been severely criticised, with a rapid turnover of crucial CLG and EADS senior staff. Since its inception, the costs of the project have escalated, and severe delays to the project mean that Fire and Rescue Authorities may now be expected to migrate to the new system at the very time that they should be concentrating on the high-profile safety concerns presented by the Olympic Games in 2012. The main representative bodies of the Fire and Rescue Service all have reservations about the project—many go further and have deep hostility—and fear that, as it is presently managed and designed, it will lead to a less efficient and less safe service.

The project has been beset by a lack of openness and collaboration with the main stakeholders from the start. If CLG had been more open from the start, many of the ensuing problems might not have occurred. This lack of openness has continued to the present, with CLG not allowing us to have sight of independent reviews of its management of the project—even in confidence—which implies a certain insecurity about its handling of the FiReControl project to date.

However, if CLG were to abandon the FiReControl project now, not only would all the claimed benefits of the project in terms of greater speed, responsiveness and efficiency be lost, but it would cost an extra £8 million more than if it were left to proceed. CLG is not quite at the point of no return, but it very soon will be. Our Report recommends that CLG should continue with the project, with renewed vigour, but this recommendation is conditional on CLG:

- resolving its contractual dispute with EADS and implementing a viable project plan;
- closely monitoring delivery of FiReControl against interim milestones, and examining alternative viable options for delivery to be implemented in case of any slippage;
- addressing the shortcomings in its management of the project;
- consulting fully with FRS staff and professionals in defining end-user requirements;
- taking further steps to shift the negative perception of the project and to influence fire and rescue authorities to make the positive decision to switch to the new system; and
- providing assurances that the safety and security of the Olympic Games will not be compromised during the roll-out of the new Regional Control Centres.²²

²² Communities and Local Government Committee, *FiReControl*, 1 April 2010, HC 352

10 Coalition Government policy development

The Conservative Party in opposition said that it would scrap the FiReControl project.²³ A number of Liberal Democrats also called for it to be scrapped.²⁴ The Coalition Government said in its programme that it would “stop plans to force the regionalisation of the fire service”.²⁵

However, the new Fire Minister, Robert Neill MP, said that the project would be reviewed before any decisions would be taken.²⁶ The Minister has not said how long this might take. In a speech to the Fire & Rescue 2010 Conference on 29 June 2010, the Minister set out his thinking:

This project has been a catalogue of delays, poor delivery and added costs...

The basic concept of FiReControl - a resilient national network of control centres, delivering modernisation and efficiencies - is sound. Control operators and fire services should be able to work together across the country, with modern shared technology, especially at busy times. Many people would be surprised that they cannot now.

But so far we have seen very little of the main system delivered. So let us focus on the three delivery basics.

The project must be delivered to time. Both the Government and the main contractor EADS have given a clear public commitments on delivery. Now is the time to keep to those commitments. We cannot have more uncertainty and broken promises.

The project must be delivered to cost. I have already said clearly that the fire community has to face its share of cuts and efficiencies. These are tough times for public spending. Throwing more money at this project, from some bottomless pit of public expenditure, can no longer be the answer or the safety net when it hits problems. That would be totally unacceptable.

And third, the project must be delivered to quality. The fire and rescue service has been promised a system that is generally better - and at least as good as - their existing systems. The capability, resilience and performance of the new system must meet that promise. There cannot be any corner cutting. Nothing less will do.

Finally, I need to be satisfied that these three basics are achievable. As you know, the government is currently reviewing all major projects - and FiReControl is one of them. That is a timely and important step in making sure we can achieve what I have set out today - and the process must run its course as soon as possible.

I know this has been a long and frustrating business. Many of you have supported the objectives of FiReControl over many years and given your time and expertise. But have waited - and waited - to see the end product. That cannot go on.

However, you are also well aware that it is a very complex project with a history. Along the way the - many - Fire Ministers have made unhelpful announcements which have benefited nobody. I am not going to do that today - however much you would like me to!

²³ [CONTROL SHIFT: RETURNING POWER TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES](#), The Conservatives, viewed on 14 July 2010

²⁴ [REGIONAL FIRE CONTROL CENTRES SHOULD BE SCRAPPED](#), www.nickharveymp.com, 6 April 2010

²⁵ The Coalition Government, [Our Programme for Government](#), 12 May 2010

²⁶ HC Deb 17 June 2010 c526W

We all want clarity and certainty on this project. And one thing is certain - both I and the Secretary of State Eric Pickles will carefully consider every aspect of FiReControl with a view to ensuring there is a clear outcome. Then we can be confident of a way forward that best supports local fire and rescue services in doing their vital job in local communities.

I must emphasise that we expect EADS to deliver what the fire and rescue services need. But, as is only sensible, if necessary - and as recommended by the Select Committee - we will talk to the fire service community about a contingency plan.²⁷

While there have been criticisms of FiReControl, some are concerned that scrapping it may leave fire services without effective call centres:

...John Bonney, president of the Chief Fire Officers Association, said [scrapping FiReControl] would be a disaster because it could leave many local fire services stranded without call centres.

"The worse thing that could happen would be to scrap the scheme with no second option because many fire services would then be five years behind," he said.

This is because many fire services have delayed technology refreshes with the expectation that FiReControl would be delivered on time. Refreshes can take up to three years, meaning some would be using obsolete technology should FiReControl be scrapped.

Bonney and Walker both accepted that if the scheme had been delivered on time and on budget, it would have been better than the current system because it would allow any control centre to dispatch any fire engine regardless of location – something that is currently not possible.²⁸

²⁷ [Leading a lean and efficient Fire & Rescue Service](#), Department for Communities and Local Government, 29 June 2010

²⁸ [Government admits to bungling FiReControl project](#), Computing.co.uk, 9 February 2010