



NFCC responds to Public Accounts Committee ESN further progress

Following the publication of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report 'Emergency Services Network: further progress review' the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) maintains that the provision of reliable, secure and resilient communications with the best available technology is an essential component in safeguarding the public and emergency responders alike, which is the top priority of the emergency services.

Throughout the lifetime of the Programme the NFCC and its representatives, including those of its predecessor, the Chief Fire Officers Association, have consistently made it clear to Government that the timescales for delivery of the Emergency Services Network (ESN) are unduly ambitious, the costs overly optimistic and that the technology required to deliver ESN will take significant time to mature.

The NFCC agrees with the PAC's findings that unless the issues highlighted in the report are addressed there is a distinct risk that the current delivery timeline would mean that ESN will be in an immature state that's unreliable, does not have the confidence of users and ultimately puts the lives of the public and emergency responders at risk, something that's simply unacceptable.

As outlined in the report, the risks associated with integrating so many differing pieces of complex and bespoke technology into a truly effective capability should not be underestimated. Integration has created significant hurdles for other emergency services technology programmes. The NFCC remains keen to work with Government to share previous learning and experiences to avoid similar mistakes being made.

Despite the challenges of such a large and complex technology Programme, the NFCC still believes that ESN is the most appropriate direction of travel for the future of emergency services communications. However, the components of ESN and the overall end solution must be at least as good as Airwave to provide Fire and Rescue Service staff with the tools necessary to undertake their demanding and often dangerous duties.

Chief Fire Officer Darryl Keen, Strategic Lead for Operational Communications for the National Fire Chiefs Council said "This report highlights a number of key areas to be addressed in order to provide

sufficient assurance and gain the confidence of Fire and Rescue Services. ESN must deliver reliable, secure and resilient communications technology that meet our future needs.

“The NFCC will continue to work with the Programme and Government to ensure that ESN is fit for purpose and that the timescales for delivery are realistic and achievable.

“We also recognise that the implementation of ESN will be one of many technology, digital and transformation challenges for every Fire and Rescue Service which will have to be managed against a backdrop of increasing fiscal pressures and budgetary uncertainty. Therefore, ESN must also be affordable for local Fire and Rescue Services.”

Findings within the PAC report includes the following recommendations:

- 1) Recommendation: The Department [Home Office] should set out, by October 2019 a detailed, achievable, integrated programme plan including a realistic date for turning off Airwave and the cost of any extension of Airwave that may be needed and update the Committee when this plan is ready.
- 2) Recommendation: The Department [Home Office] should write to the Committee by October 2019 setting out the steps that it has taken to: improve senior oversight of the programme; ensure assumptions are subject to appropriate challenge; and to make sure the findings of independent assurance reviews are widely shared and taken seriously.
- 3) Recommendation: The Department [Home Office] should, without delay, agree with users a set of specific and detailed criteria that will be used to determine when ESN is ready to replace Airwave, and who will ultimately decide when those criteria are met
- 4) Recommendation: Before contracting with a new delivery partner, the Department [Home Office] should analyse the skills and tasks needed to integrate ESN, how any skills gaps will be filled, and how lessons from the failure of the KBR contract will be applied to the new delivery partner contract.
- 5) Recommendation: The Department [Home Office] should write to the Committee by October 2019 setting out how it will manage the risks presented by Motorola’s position and the possible need to extend Airwave until it can be replaced by ESN.
- 6) Recommendation: The Department [Home Office] should ensure it delivers a revised and approved business case, which both the emergency services and the other funders of ESN support, by the end of 2019 at the latest. The business case should include an appraisal of when continuing to spend money on ESN ceases to be value for money and should set out a ‘plan B’ for what would happen if that point was reached

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