Fire Services Management Committee   **Item 2**

23 November 2009

FiReControl - alternative options

Summary

At its meeting on 18 September the Fire Services Management Committee agreed that officers should look at options for Fire and Rescue Authorities should the FiReControl project not proceed. This paper sets out a number of options for members' consideration.

Recommendations

Members are asked to
- identify option(s) they would like developed further;
- agree when the options should be put before the Fire Forum
- submit the agreed options to CLG.

Action

Officers and advisers to work up the selected options in more detail and arrange for them to be put to the Fire Forum.

Contact Officer: Trish O'Flynn
Phone No: 020 7664 3129
Email: trish.oflynn@lga.gov.uk

FiReControl - alternative options

Background

1. The initiation of the FiReControl project in 2004 was based on the premise that current control and mobilisation systems could be greatly improved in both resilience and networking using the latest technology. Today, the FiReControl project is at an advanced stage. The current timetable is for the first Regional Control Centres (North East, East Midlands and South West) to go live in spring 2011, with the full system expected to be in place by the end of 2012.

2. Major national contracts for IT and facilities management are in place. Eight of the nine RCC buildings are built, with the London building due for completion in February 2010. Three RCCs are under lease to Local Authority Controlled Companies; all eight LACCs have appointed Directors and other key staff to set up and run the RCCs. FRAs are advanced in their preparations for transition to RCCs by putting in place staffing arrangements for cutover, preparation of data for the new IT systems and developing common ways of working.

3. Since project inception in 2004 the economic and political climate has shifted considerably. In September concerns over two, separate ten-month delays and costs of this national project led the Committee to the following resolution:

    'The FSMC is against the principle of the implementation of Regional Control Centres however will continue to engage with CLG to ensure FRAs are properly resourced, will afford effective oversight and review the programme regularly on behalf of the Fire and Rescue Authorities and will continue to promote good industrial relations where applicable and asks LGA officers to develop alternative options in the event of project failure, to be brought back to the FSMC at a future date'.

4. In the event of project failure FRAs would still have legal duties to make arrangements for dealing with calls for help and for summoning personnel (Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004) and to put in place business continuity plans (Civil Contingencies Act 2004). There is no general requirement to contribute to national resilience, other than the duty in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 to develop mutual aid schemes with other FRAs.

Related initiatives: Firelink

5. Firelink is an integral part of the project as it provides the radio and mobile data network in FRS vehicles and the RCCs. An interim (voice only) solution is due to be completed by spring 2010 with the full voice and data system linked to FiReControl cut over. London (as well as Scotland and Wales) will have the full system.

Strategic Principles

6. FiReControl, were it successful, would offer benefits in terms of:
    - Public safety - improved incident response time (by mobilisation of nearest available resource, even if a neighbouring FRA)
    - Fire fighter safety – access to risk information (via mobile data terminals in fire appliances)
    - National resilience - response to major/wide area incidents (via fall back system to deal with call handling overload)
    - Interoperability and mobilisation of New Dimensions assets (through common working practices)
    - Efficiency (e.g. reduction in control room staff, replacement of obsolete equipment or accommodation)
    - Full delivery of Fire Link voice and data communication system (as opposed to current voice-only interim solution).

7. Our strategy, in developing alternative options to FiReControl, is consistent with the LGA's corporate aims:
    - Economy - supporting local government to lead the country out of recession;
    - Reputation - building the reputation of councils as outstanding service providers, community leaders and employers of choice;
    - Value for Money - supporting councils to greater efficiency and lobbying for the funding they need to deliver the job;
    - Democracy - ensuring local decision-making and local government-led improvement is at the centre of debate.

8. In identifying the options for Members' consideration we developed the following principles to reflect our strategic aims in the FiReControl context:
    - *Ensure local FRAs are at the heart of any system, with sufficient flexibility to achieve local solutions*: any options put forward should resonate with the sector. Focussing on locally based options rules out a national or regional approach, such as nationalised call handling or stand alone regional control centres;
    - *Be realistic that all of the benefits of FiReControl will not be achieved*: any alternative options will not deliver all the benefits and will 'feel' quite different from the RCC based approach;
    - *Maximise the investment and technological developments so that no FRA is disadvantaged*: options should, where possible, deliver operational improvements; some FRAs have delayed plans for replacing legacy systems and should not be penalised. This would include any FRA whose control room would need replacing by the end of 2012, the estimated full cut over date.
    - *Ensure CLG honours its New Burdens commitment so that any fallback option is fully funded*: the LGA will lobby Government so that FRAs are not left with unbudgeted costs as a result of project failure, including the winding down costs of LACCs and project management staff employed directly by FRAs.

What FRAs told us

9. We surveyed FRAs to identify what benefits current control systems offer and what additional benefits they would like from any alternatives. Twenty five FRAs (55%) responded; a summary of the responses is attached at Appendix 1.

10. In relation to the baseline position, it is clear is that FRAs are at different levels of capability in terms of control room equipment and accommodation. Some of the FRAs due to cut over to RCCs in the first wave are particularly vulnerable as systems may be overdue for replacement. Most FRAs who responded confirmed that business continuity plans are being developed in case of project failure.

11. The benefits that FRAs would like to see incorporated in any alternative options are, in order of preference:
    - improved incident response time
    - access to risk information
    - response to major incidents (call handling)
    - systems and accommodation fit for purpose
    - common working practices
    - the full Fire Link solution.

The options

12. The more benefits to be delivered from any option, the higher the costs and degree of complexity of delivery. We are cautious about putting firm costs and timescales against some of the options as not all the information we need is publicly available. However, we have been able to develop 4 possible options which reflect views from the sector and which are aligned with our strategic priorities. This will enable us to submit a credible contingency position to CLG.

13. The Committee is asked to identify two of the following options to be developed in more detail, particularly in regard to costs and timescales:

    - **Option 1** – FRAs left to make their own arrangements with CLG funding LACC and FRA based project management winding up costs only: this has the advantage of being simple and truly local, however any operational improvement is dependent on existing FRA funding, a particular risk for FRAs with obsolete control room equipment;
    - **Option 2** – FRAs make own arrangements with some central funding to replace obsolete equipment and for LACC winding up costs: simple and locally focussed, at risk FRAs receive funding but further improvement is dependent on FRA funding;

- **Option 3** – FRAs make own arrangements with central funding to deliver some improvements with CLG installing full Fire Link solution: this will deliver improvement in some areas but at a much greater cost than options 1 and 2;
- **Option 4** – FRAs make own arrangements with central funding to deliver some improvements; CLG delivers full Fire Link solution and upgrades three control rooms to 'super controls': this is the most costly and complex but achieves improvement across all areas and could be delivered in two stages, with the networked control rooms delivered later.

14. A summary of the benefits offered by each of the options is set out in the table below. Other issues for consideration:

- Options 3 and 4 deliver the majority of the benefits FRAs would like from any options
- The full Fire Link solution in options 3 and 4 is included as it offers some fire-fighter safety, interoperability and national resilience benefits, but there remain questions about the full rollout of Firelink beyond the interim solution
- Options 3 and 4 would require national level project management
- Timescales will be dependent on project management capability and market capacity to deliver solutions to a number of FRAs simultaneously
- Option 4 reflects the Conservative position put forward in the 'Control Shift' Localism policy paper.

Benefits	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
Public safety	No	No	Yes, limited	Yes, limited
Fire-fighter safety	No	No	Yes, limited	Yes, limited
National resilience	No	No	No	Yes, some
Interoperability	No	No	Yes, limited	Yes, limited
Efficiency	No	Yes, some	Yes, some	Yes, some
Fire Link	Interim	Interim	Full	Full
Cost – broad estimates, excluding central costs	Variable according to local needs and LACC winding up costs	£50m	£50m plus full Firelink tbc	£50m plus full Firelink tbc plus 3 super controls tbc
Timescale - estimated	Immediate	1 year minimum	2-3 years tbc	3 years + tbc
Deliverability	Simple	Straightforward	Fairly complex	Very complex

Reputation and Relationships

15. The failure of FiReControl would be a blow to the credibility of the Government and also presents reputational risks for FRAs if risks around services and resilience are increased. The relationship between CLG and FRAs would undoubtedly be damaged however, the scale and longevity of any damage will depend in part on the approach taken by the Government, particularly to funding and support for alternatives.

Next steps

16. Members are invited to agree which option(s) should be put to the Fire Forum for further discussion. The next planned date is 12 February 2010, although as members of the Forum are keen for an early opportunity to discuss the options, it might be possible to combine a Forum with the 18 January 2010 FSMC meeting. The worked up options will also be submitted to CLG.

Financial Implications

17. The FiReControl Business Case (version 1.1, May 2009) puts the total implementation cost of FiReControl at approximately £380 million and also estimates that it would cost £320m (at 2006-07 prices) to cancel existing

national contracts and unwind the project. This would mean zero benefit for a total expenditure approaching £500m (when transitional costs are taken into account) and a waste of public funding of this magnitude would undoubtedly attract negative coverage and scrutiny. It is assumed that this cost includes the disposal of the RCC buildings, thought to be around £200m, as well as the winding up costs for LACCs and project management staff directly employed by FRAs.

18.   There would be further financial effects should the project be cancelled, this is because the business case includes assumed savings (called 'cost avoidance elements') in other areas and it would become necessary to make financial provision for those projects that need to continue. This would include the Firelink interim solution as the FiReControl project would have installed the Firelink solution in nine control rooms, so avoiding the cost of integrating the system into 46 existing controls. It is difficult to identify the cost of installing Firelink into all local control rooms as the cost information that is in the public domain is dependent on FiReControl proceeding, it is however believed to be considerable.

19.   The Government has committed to ensuring that any net additional costs falling on FRAs are funded under New Burdens principles, where those costs arise solely as a result of its policy decision to introduce FiReControl. We would expect that principle to remain should costs fall on FRAs as a result of project failure.

Implications for Wales

20. This is an England only project and therefore none identified.

Contact Officer: Trish O'Flynn
Phone No: 020 7664 3129
Email: trish.oflynn@lga.gov.uk