

UNION ATTACKS GOVERNMENT REGIONAL CONTROLS MOVE



Union denounces project as "wasteful and dangerous" as ODPM chooses parliamentary recess to make controversial announcement

The Union has slammed the Government for pushing ahead with emergency fire control regionalisation plans that will make the UK's fire service less effective and more expensive.

Fire minister Jim Fitzpatrick unveiled the site locations of seven regional control rooms on Wednesday 10 August.

They are:

- North East - Belmont Business Park, Durham

- North West - Lingley Mere Business Park, Great Sankey, Warrington, Cheshire
- East Anglia - Cambridge Research Park, Cambridge
- East Midlands - Willow Farm Business Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire
- West Midlands - Wolverhampton Business Park, Wolverhampton
- South West - Blackbrook Business Park, Taunton, Somerset.
- Yorkshire and Humberside - Paragon Business Village, Wakefield, West Yorkshire

London has become a defacto "regional" control room - despite failing to meet the Government's own resilience criteria - while negotiations in the South East are ongoing.

The announcement came after the Government admitted it would be spending £44 million in consultancy fees alone for the FireControl project. The disgraceful admission was made in response to an FBU question under the Freedom of Information Act.

That amount of money would pay for an extra 1,400 firefighters who could save lives. Or it would pay for a major boost to community fire safety, or for initiatives to reduce arson. It is money that could save lives.

Government lining pockets of consultants with public money

"Instead the money is being used to line the pockets of yet more consultants to allow them to chase yet another technology rainbow, using untested technology. And to find the money, the new scheme will ensure that there are fewer staff to deal with more calls from the public - as calls have been increasing every year," President Ruth Winters said.

"And consultants may cost far more than £44 million. The estimate has soared by nearly £13 million since April, when it stood at £31.3 million.

"To do this at any time would be dangerous and irresponsible.

"But to gamble with the efficiency of the fire service at a time when the threat of terrorism makes its efficiency a matter of life and death for all of us is almost criminally irresponsible."

Weakness of case revealed by move to announce while parliament on recess

The control room location announcement was made as quietly as possible in the hope that no one will notice.

219 MPs backed an Early Day Motion which called on the government to rethink the control centres project. Ministers have known that this was their intention for some months, but decided to announce it in the middle of the holiday season, when the House of Commons was not sitting, in the hope that no one would notice.

This didn't work - thanks to the efforts of the FBU, press coverage on August 10 was substantial.

Regionalisation undermines resilience

The Union also countered the claim made Wednesday by Fire Minister Jim Fitzpatrick that his long-planned proposals would enable London to deal more effectively with terrorist attacks such as that on 7 July.

"The truth is that you cannot respond better to major attacks by having 380 people fewer to respond," says Ruth Winters, referring to the job losses regional controls will bring.

"The truth is that the government proposal to create nine new call fire control centres in England to replace the existing 46, using untested technology, at a cost of £1 billion including consultancy

fees of £44 million, will make us less able to respond to terrorist outrages" says Ms Winters.

"London has one fire brigade. All the successes of June 7 were based upon one brigade liaising with one police service and the other services, and the fact that the staff at the control centres are used to London. Yet the government wants to introduce huge multi-Brigade controls, with fewer people and roomfuls of glossy, expensive but untried technology. To depend on technology instead of depending on people is folly.

"It is madness to suggest that meeting the terrorist threat for the fire service would be enhanced by introducing multi-Brigade controls."

Campaign must be stepped up

Members and officials now have to keep up the pressure:

- exploiting the weaknesses in the ODPM's case
- building on the strong public backing for our campaign and
- maintaining keen press interest

This can take many forms, but some of the more effective campaigning involves meeting MPs and councillors face to face and getting out onto the streets of our cities and towns throughout the country.

We need to keep making the arguments. Regional controls mean:

- Massive waste of public money

- Higher council tax bills
- Cuts to frontline fire services
- Reduced service due to less staff, more calls and untested Technology
- Less safe communities

Campaign/lobbying materials are available on the Control Care website (www.controlcare.org.uk).

Regional and Brigade Officials are available to assist in organising any events that are planned.

With a combined effort from all sections of the FBU, throughout all Regions, we can make a difference to the Government's current plans.

Now is the time to step up our campaign and take our highly principled and responsible stance further. This is about the future of all our members, our communities and our Service!

Meeting with Fire minister

National FBU representatives are to meet Fire minister Jim Fitzpatrick to discuss the Government's announcement of the site locations for the seven regional emergency fire control rooms.

The meeting will take place on August 25.

General Secretary Matt Wrack, President Ruth Winters and National Officer responsible for the control campaign Geoff Ellis will be attending on behalf of the Union.

Suffolk dispute - national solidarity demo massive

FBU members from across the country descended on Ipswich yesterday to show their solidarity with Suffolk members battling to defend their jobs and the safety of their local community.

General Secretary Matt Wrack, President Ruth Winters and National Officers John McGhee and Paul Woolstenholmes joined other officials and members at a demonstration and rally, highlighting the backing the Union nationally is giving to firefighters in the brigade.

The rally followed the failure of Tuesday's talks with brigade management to deliver any change in the latter's determination, under its Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), to axe 12 emergency response firefighters.

Said Brigade Chair Vince Jell, after the talks:

"We presented the Suffolk Fire Authority with our own professional risk assessment, which shows the danger of cutting the number of Suffolk emergency response firefighters. They have decided to ignore this danger with a cut of 12 emergency response firefighters in a fire authority under increased pressure and with growing risks," said Brigade Chair Vince Jell.

"Bitterly disappointed though we are, the Fire Brigades Union nonetheless is willing to meet them again, at any time in any place and for as long as it takes, to try to

resolve this dispute."

FBU president Ruth Winters and General Secretary Matt Wrack have made themselves available to assist in any further talks.

Suffolk members went on strike yesterday at 16.00-19.00, and are set to take further short periods of strike action on 17,19,20 and 21 August and 3,10,17 and 24 October.

Suffolk fire authority misleading the public

Suffolk FBU has criticised the Fire Authority for seeking to mislead the public over the cuts and alleged external backing for them.

Although the council has now admitted that they are indeed axing 12 firefighters from the 999 frontline service, the council's claims that 9 of the jobs will be switched to prevention work is untrue.

The fact is that only six posts will be switched to "desk-jobs" and not the nine repeatedly claimed by the council. These six posts will only have swivel chairs to sit on rather than fire engines.

The other three "jobs" claimed do not in fact exist. The truth is that they intend the additional work of three firefighters to be given to existing staff to do on a short-term, part-time basis on top of their normal 42-hour week.

Suffolk Councillor Spicer also claimed the fire authority had "assurances" from the ODPM and

Audit Commission that what the Fire Authority was "doing was right".

Contacted by the FBU's Firefighter magazine regarding these supposed "assurances" the ODPM said it had no authority to endorse any IRMP and the Audit Commission failed to confirm that it had given any "assurances" over the IRMP.

In fact, the Audit Commission's recently published CPA into Suffolk Fire Service underlined the FBU's view that the IRMP changes are cuts driven. It confirmed that the cut of the 12 emergency response firefighters will realise savings to fund the national pay settlement.

Fire authority isolated in determination to make cuts

Brigade Chair Vince Jell accused county politicians of "dreaming up non-existent support".

The truth is that employers and senior management are alone in supporting these cuts.

Carl Francis, a fire officer for 19 years, who represents the FBU's professional Fire Officers in Suffolk and was one of the FBU's team at the talks says:

"Surely it must signal something is seriously wrong when the professional men and women who risk their lives on a daily basis to save others are prepared to suffer the consequences of taking strike action - not for any financial gain, but in defence of their professional, life-saving service," says Mr Francis.

Mr Francis says: "The plan is poorly prepared, lacks evidence and proper risk assessment. There is no professional risk or safety-based justification for the cut of 12 emergency response firefighters.

"No-one inside the service is convinced by the Council's claim that their plans will make Suffolk safer.

"The united professional opinion of the fire officer ranks is the Council's cuts will make Suffolk less safe. The people who are being expected to make the plan work simply don't believe in it."

The ODPM requires the IRMP to be based on the evidence of comprehensive assessments of the risks across the County. The FBU has repeatedly requested copies of the Council's evidential assessments but none have been forthcoming. The FBU has learned that a middle-ranking fire officer has now been given the task of belatedly drafting the risk assessments long after the Council came to their IRMP conclusions - a case of putting the cart before the horse.

Messages/resolutions of support for Suffolk members can be emailed to Suffolk brigade chair, [Vince Jell](mailto:vince@thejells@hotmail.com), (vince@thejells@hotmail.com)

Nottingham shift changes referred to TAP

Nottingham fire authority have declared a failure to agree with the FBU over new shift patterns

they are seeking to introduce on 1 January 2006 and referred the issue to the Technical Advisory Panel.

The move came after only 3 meetings and 15 days from the tabling of their first formal proposal to change the shift system.

The fire authority said at the last of these meetings on August 3 that they are seeking an "annualised hours shift system based on three shift changes in any 24 hours". This, they say does not necessarily have to be 3X8 hours, although this is their preferred option.

FBU Nottingham rejected this proposal as unchanged from previous proposals put forward by the fire authority it had already rejected.

FBU Nottingham's proposal of a 24/72 hour proposal was rejected by the fire authority at the August 3 meeting.

New National Retained Committee Secretary

Peter Preston has been elected as Retained Committee National Secretary. He received 1,005 to Leigh Redman's 701 votes.

For more information about the National Retained Committee and what it is doing for firefighters working the retained duty system log on to www.fbu.org.uk

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Stressed?

Bullied?

Get help from the Union!

On the Move?

Members are reminded to advise their brigade membership secretary of any change of address. Head Office should be advised of any changes of next of kin or nominations for benefits.