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GOVERNMENT HEADS FOR NEXT IT DISASTER



Union blasts announcement of South East regional control room as MPs criticise regional controls

The Union has warned that the Government is heading for its next major technology disaster after it continued blindly with the FiReControl project with the announcement of the site location of the South East regional control room.

The Government yesterday said the control room replacing existing rescue co-ordination control centres in Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Berkshire, Oxon and Buckinghamshire would be based at Fareham in Hampshire at Kite's Croft Business Park.

In a statement, the Union said: "They don't know how much this will cost or if it will work at all. If this goes as sadly wrong as other IT projects it will put our lives at risk and the lives of the public at risk.

"They have chosen some of the worst

locations to base their regional controls. The South West control is based in a flood plain sited around the back of Sainsburys in a retail park. The East Midlands control is based in a flood plain in a business park near an airport. The London control is based near Canary Wharf, an area which has already been targeted by bombers. And Canary Wharf itself is an obvious terrorist target.

"We will continue to oppose these bad and dangerous plans until the Government sees sense."

SE control means 'less effective' emergency response, adds FBU Berks

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service will cope less effectively with emergency incidents if the government pushes ahead with its proposal to amalgamate nine South East emergency fire controls into 1 in Fareham, Hampshire, says

Berkshire FBU secretary Eddie Cardoso.

Eddie Cardoso said: "This is a disaster waiting to happen. The South East has the highest number of potential targets for disruptive action in England." These include:

- five major airports and the most congested airspace
- 11 maritime ports, four container ports and the most congested sea-lanes
- around 700 miles of coastline
- the most complex motorway network
- the most complex rail network
- the largest number of nuclear establishments
- a significant number of large-scale social and sporting events and locations

Exceptional professionalism

Paul Watts, FBU membership secretary and control rep said:

"Berkshire's Emergency Fire Control Firefighters will continue to provide an exceptional level of professional service to the people of Berkshire and the county's firefighters.

"The government has already admitted that they will be spending £1 billion of taxpayer's money nationally on an untested new technology project. This money will have to be paid for by the local tax payers resulting in even higher council tax bills.

"To waste public money is an outrage, to gamble with public safety is unthinkable.

No technology, even if it were tried and trusted, can replace a human being at the end of the telephone in an emergency. These proposals will put the public and firefighters at greater risk."

MPs blast regional controls plan as parliament reopens

Parliament opened this week with a debate on the Government's plans to regionalise English emergency services, including the fire and rescue service. The debate on Wednesday 12 October saw MPs from all three main parties criticise the Government's FiReControl project and urge the Government to think again. Plans to regionalise police and ambulance services were also attacked by MPs of all parties.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab), chair of the FBU Parliamentary Support Group, said that in view of the ODPM's own severe doubts about the low chances of success and high costs of the FiReControl project, the opposition from fire service professionals and the public, an independent enquiry should be launched.

Existing control rooms "excellent"

He said: "All hon. members agree with the outline business case statement that the existing arrangements for delivering core services, including call handling and dispatch functions, within the fire service are perceived to be excellent, and almost every hon.

member who has spoken has congratulated the staff and the service on how they currently operate... If we are to move forward, we must ensure that do so carefully and that we take the professionals with us. The outline business case urges caution: *"There is no other example of a regional service being provided in this way."*

Will it work? High risk of failure

"...we must address the basic questions. Will the proposal work? Does it have the confidence of the people whom we will require to deliver the service? Will the reform be cost-effective? If it is not cost-effective, what is the fall-back position?

"The business case states that the reform is a "high risk" venture. It assesses the risk of "delay or even total project failure" as "high", with a "very high" impact if the project fails. Why does it draw that conclusion?

"Although the project is not unique, novel or innovative, the business case points out that "the recent history of delivering IT/change projects in the public sector has demonstrated a less than 50 per cent success rate."

"The business case addresses the point that the scheme's high IT content may bring it close to failure. Scepticism at such an early stage is constructive, because it means that we must address the issues.

Project doesn't command confidence of professionals

"Does the project command the confidence of the professionals themselves? The FBU's view does not require reiteration, because we have heard it from both sides of the House. Frontline firefighters are deeply sceptical about whether the scheme will work, about the cost savings... No matter what assurances the Government make, we must accept the firefighters' concerns. What about the organisations on the ground which were consulted about the business case?"

Holding a copy of the report on the views of the regional management boards that was sent to Ministers, John McDonnell then went on to list their opposition and rejection of the OBC on a financial and practical grounds. He then added:

"The business case makes it clear that neither the front-line firefighters nor the regional management boards, who must deliver the project, were convinced by the argument. I worry that if they were not convinced, then the proposals will not be successful, and that the lack of confidence in the deliverability of the project will undermine our assurance to our constituents that the Government are providing the necessary services to protect their safety and the lives of their families."

Threat of council tax rises and cuts to frontline fire service

John McDonnell then expressed his concerns about escalating costs and

questioned: "Where will the money be found if there is a lack of confidence and therefore cost overruns? There are two options—increases in the council tax or cuts in the fire service."

Minister Jim Fitzpatrick promised to write to John McDonnell to explain the detail of the costs. John McDonnell added:

Minister pressed to reveal details of all costs

"I would be extremely grateful if [the minister] could include the detail on whether the costs exclude depreciation, full capital costs, migration costs, the cost of buildings maintenance rehabilitation, the cost of patching up the current system until the new one comes online, and the write-off costs for the existing system.

"That would give us the opportunity of having an honest and clear discussion about what the overall cost burden will be."

John McDonnell then went on to criticise the timing of the site locations announcement:

"It is a shame that the proposals were announced during the recess...It should have happened before the recess to enable us to have a proper debate.

"Moreover, there should have been a full ministerial statement to debate instead of a patchwork of amendments.

Appeal for independent review

He concluded with an appeal for an independent review:

"I appeal to the Government to take a breathing space in which we can stand back. They should establish an independent review and engage in full consultation, so that if we move forward we do so on an agreed basis."

The appeal was repeated by fellow FBU parliamentary support group member David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op):

"The Minister knows from our discussion yesterday that I was lobbied by the fire control staff of the five component counties of the east midlands, which will see their centres closed and relocated to the northern part of north-west Leicestershire.

"If he is so convinced of the strength of his case on regional centres, will he now announce that there will be an independent assessment of the business case that underpins a very expensive and quite risky project?"

Minister rejects review

Minister Fitzpatrick rejected an independent review thus: "The Government certainly do not believe that such an assessment is needed. We believe that all the protocols of assessment within the Government have been observed and that the business case, as well as the professional and organisational case, clearly stand up to scrutiny."

Minister Fitzpatrick claims:

: ... "We are not trying to force amalgamations or mergers..."

"...If I have not apologised before, I certainly do so now. We had hoped to be able to deliver that information [on site locations of regional control rooms] before the summer recess, but it was not possible. We put the locations out as soon as we could, which was during the recess. It would have been equally inappropriate to wait until we came back in October to do so.

Other comments by MPs:

Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con), who moved this opposition motion:

"No one is going to be fooled by the packaging of these proposals. People can see that reorganisation is a cost-cutting exercise, not least because of the 1,300 or so jobs that will be lost in local fire control rooms.

"Although these changes will not be complete until 2009...the reality is that jobs will start leaching away from now, undermining the quality of the service in the interim. That will happen with all emergency services as regionalisation gathers pace.

"...it would seem elementary that in the current climate of heightened security, consolidating multiple emergency services into just one location makes the overall structure even more vulnerable to attack. If a regional centre is

knocked out, I presume that the fallback would be another regional centre even further away. That smacks of putting all our eggs in one basket.

Government doesn't trust frontline

"People at the front line know where and when to coalesce far better than a bureaucrat in Whitehall, so why do the Government not trust them and give them that freedom?"

"Something tells me that that the Government are all too aware of the folly of this regionalisation programme...

Regionalisation is proxy for sweeping cuts to public services

"...regionalisation has... become a proxy for sweeping cuts to our public services.

"Taxpayers have a right to know what has happened to their money. Has a risk assessment or a cost-benefit analysis of regionalisation been carried out? The Minister says yes, so perhaps he we would like to publish it and make it available to members.

"When local police stations, fire control rooms and ambulance trusts are boarded up and the land used for the Deputy Prime Minister's so-called £60,000 houses, people will see how he and the Chancellor have conspired to scrap their local emergency services, and they will not thank them for it.

"There is no demand for regionalisation; the quality of our services will suffer and it comes at a high price.

"Surely now is the time to abort this disastrous regionalisation programme and to accede to the wishes of the electorate. The Deputy Prime Minister is playing politics with people's lives... the public interest must come first."

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead)

(Con): The Minister... knows that local knowledge of topography saves lives...the Minister does not believe that what is going on is right—it will cost lives and he knows that it has done.

"We are now talking about moving to nine regional control centres. If this is all about saving money—and it is; the Minister has already said that he wants to invest it elsewhere—perhaps we could just have one control centre. Or perhaps we could do as the banks have done and have a call centre in Delhi or Bombay.

"If it is not about knowledge and only about technology, the proposal for nine centres does not make sense."

"...the key is lives being saved. That is why I fundamentally oppose the project, and why the FBU opposes it, as it understands the situation on the ground much better than any bureaucrat in Westminster."

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight)

(Con): Only last night, the now Conservative-controlled Isle of

Wight council agreed to co-operate with Conservative-controlled Hampshire council on the provision of fire services. They did not need to amalgamate to provide an improved service.


Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (Lib Dem): "Bain specifically advised against regional reorganisation and instead proposed regional co-operation. He suggested that co-operation could achieve all the benefits without major organisational structure change. However, the Government's response ignored Bain's advice and set out to establish regional fire authorities as part of regional assemblies...Once the wheels came off the plan for elected regional assemblies, the Government ploughed ahead regardless.

Ronnie Campbell (Labour, Tynemouth): "The idea is to regionalise the fire service and then to introduce a Bill to privatise it. That is the motive."

Control campaign - Hampshire

Members of the public attended an open meeting arranged by Hampshire FBU control operators at Portsmouth Guildhall 5 October 2005 to hear about the Government's plans for fire control rooms and what it will mean to the residents of Hampshire.

The panel, consisted of FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack, EC Member Dean Mills, Hampshire Fire Authority Vice-Chair Cllr. Phil Heath and Control Operators, Julie Barton and Sharon Eames.



It was a chance to hear first hand about the current excellent arrangements for Fire Control in Hampshire. The meeting heard how through training and self auditing, Fire Control Operators have not only met but exceeded the Government's own Best Value targets answering 999 calls and mobilising to them within 60 seconds or less 97% of the time.

Cllr. Heath told the meeting of his own grave concerns over cost and public safety and he likened the ODPM to "sleazy double glazing salesmen who insist on selling you something even if you don't want it!"

Matt Wrack explained how the costs of the project had soared out of all reason and would lead to increased council tax and cuts to front line services.

The audience, which included local residents, Neighbourhood Forum Co-ordinators and fellow trade unionists, pledged support for the Campaign against Regional Emergency Fire Controls.

They were shocked that these plans could be forced through without proper consultation and without a public enquiry into the costs of the whole thing. The overall resounding message to come out of the meeting was: "If it aint broke don't fix it"!

Control campaign - new regional centres 'resilient', 'secure'?

One member has written to Head Office informing us that the proposed Northwest regional control at Lingley Mere Business Park, Great Sankey, Warrington, Cheshire "...could suffer problems as it is to be built on land that is known for mining subsidance. That is why the M62 Motorway is so uneven just half a mile from the proposed site."

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