

RCCs: really the

More work needed before major decisions are made on regional controls, according to a new report by the Institute of Public Finance

An Institute of Public Finance report says more work is needed on key areas of the plan to close all 46 local emergency fire control rooms in England and open nine regional controls. This includes “revisiting” whether regional controls are the best option, and greater justification for opting for nine regional control rooms rather than a higher figure.

The report says the level of savings also needs to be looked at again, based on the latest information. The report questions whether the Government FireControl plans will result in overall savings.

The independent and objective report for the FBU examined the original Outline

Business Case for the project and the draft Final Business Case. It says the figures for savings produced so far “can only be regarded as indicative” partly because the Government does not know how much the technology infrastructure will cost or the cost of building a new control centre for London. The report also says there is confusion as to the true ‘vision’ of the project and that a lack of accessibility and transparency in both Business Cases “leaves a lot to be desired”.

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Who’s doing the spinning?

The FBU has been accused of “spinning” the case against Regional Control Centres, one of the most complicated projects ever undertaken in the fire service. Boiled down, the union has said these types of projects have a history of being late, being more expensive than first stated and don’t do what they originally said on the tin.

The original timetable had the first RCC becoming operational in November 2006. The latest timetable says around the end of 2009, so our first criticism is already valid.

In a parliamentary answer – it has never been acknowledged by Government before – the Department for Communities admitted the technology part of the project had leapt from £120 million to £190 million. The £70 million extra is easily more than a 50% leap in the estimated “project” costs, and even this figure may be less than is needed to make the system work.

There is also the controversy about which costs are counted

and which are kept “off the books” to maintain the fiction that the project will make savings and pay for itself. What follows are extracts from a report by Hertfordshire Chief Officer Roy Wilsher – who backs the project – which outlines only some of the problems and costs identified with FireLink and FireControl. This was reported to the Herts County Council Community Safety Panel.

“Both projects are having workload and resource impacts on the fire and rescue service which will increase as the projects move closer to implementation.” These costs are not counted as part of either project.

Also off the books of FireControl, but which will have to be paid by fire authorities, include the huge costs to:

“Convert all our existing operational guidance notes into a new format; produce risk plans in a different format so that they will display on the MDT provided by FireLink; create interfaces

between existing FRS systems and the RCC to dynamically update the status and location of resources ... The above is not an exhaustive list although the largest impact will be the ongoing tasks such as updating and maintaining the data supplied to the RCC.”

Other work carried out by existing local fire controls (but off the books and not counted) include: “For example they collate and process all the service fire reports which are sent to fire research. They answer the ‘free phone’ telephone number out of hours for public requests for home safety visits, as well as numerous other activities like managing fire ground radio sets and retained firefighters’ alerters.”

But there is other work which is also essential and which has not been costed or counted to maintain the fiction that RCCs are cheaper and will pay for themselves. “An example of this might be crewing of appliances.

The RCC will ensure that there are sufficient firefighters to crew an appliance; however it is down to the FRS to balance resources to maintain “Confidence” levels on appliances. It is therefore believed that the FRS will still require a small department operated on a 24x7 basis which can deal with crewing and other operational administrative tasks. This will therefore have an impact on the Fire and Rescue Service once existing control staff transfer to the new RCC or leave.”

The truth is, it is worse than that. Not only are these costs not counted as costs, in the weird and wacky world of FireControl they count as a saving!

It’s a bit like only saying the cost of a car is the price you paid for it while ignoring car tax, servicing, insurance and the price of fuel.

➔ More info including the full IPF report is available at www.fbu.org.uk/campaigns/outofcontrol/

best option?

It goes on to warn that “if savings are adversely affected” then “the validity of the business case and how it meets its key objectives (including affordability and value for money) could be called into question.” It warns that any changes to savings and costs could have a “significant” knock-on effect on that part of the Council Tax raised by fire authorities.

Revisiting options

The report says:

“Options that have been previously disregarded should be revisited (at least at a high level) to test their suitability, applicability and value for money in current circumstances. It should not be automatically assumed that the RCC option and the current “baseline” option are the only ones that need consideration in the business case. Clearer justification is also needed in relation to the number of regional control centres put forward.

“The business case still needs more clarity on what the effect of the project and its outcomes will be on the 46 Fire and Rescue Services, particularly the impact of savings and costs and how these will be apportioned and allocated. This could have a significant knock-on effect on the levels of precept on Council Tax for Fire and Rescue Authorities.”

Key areas of risk include the interim arrangements which are agreed as being ‘critical’. The report highlights: “there is no detail as to what form these interim arrangements will take. It is our opinion that it is imperative to the success of the project that these interim arrangements are fully understood and tested. In addition it is not clear if these interim arrangements have been factored into the overall costs of the project.” The latest draft Final Business Case recognises that the local authority owned companies may not be formally agreed for the first wave of regions yet “does not address the question of what the interim governance arrangement will be.”

Some specific claims central to estimate the overall cost of the project “are questionable and are not backed up with any clear evidence.” These include the wide-ranging assertion in the draft FBC that “forecast savings are

IPF REPORT CONCLUSIONS

IPF report concludes more work needed on:

- confirmation that regional control centres as proposed are the best option;
- levels of savings to be achieved, based on the latest and most accurate information; and
- transparency to aid understanding and accessibility for readers of the business case before any major decisions are made.”

Key areas of risk include the interim arrangements which are agreed as being ‘critical’

‘What evidence was used to produce the estimated number of control staff required?’

based on very prudent assumptions. There is scope to do better.”

The report says “it is not clear whether the FBC has addressed the potential additional resourcing issues for FRS concerning ‘out of scope’ activities or identified the detail of these activities...”. Out of scope work is that which will still need to be done by fire authorities but not included in the costs of the project.

The report questions whether staff numbers have been estimated against the work the regional controls will carry out. “...what evidence was used to produce the estimated numbers of control room operators required?” and if these estimates were based on the amount of work the regional controls would have to carry out.

The focus for the review by IPF was to appraise the draft plan, and their review did not extend to taking on board any further evidence that Fire Authorities themselves may have available since the original data upon which the regional cases were made.

