

# THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION

## MORE WORK NEEDED BEFORE MAJOR DECISIONS ARE MADE ON £1 BILLION FIRE SERVICE PLAN SAYS INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC FINANCE REPORT

An Institute of Public Finance (IPF) report says more work is needed on key areas of the draft plan to close all local 46 emergency fire control rooms in England and open 9 regional controls. This includes “revisiting” whether regional controls are the best option, and greater justification for opting for 9 regional control rooms rather than a higher figure.

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

The independent and objective report for the Fire Brigades Union 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”.

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.

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 & 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 & Rescue Authorities.”

The report concludes: “it is our view that more work is 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.”

The other options previously disregarded need to be “revisited” in the light of, for example, a terror threat which has changed since the plan was originally put forward in 2003; neither the previous nor latest business case considers other options such as the tri-service pilots option; using existing control rooms; nor merging existing controls.

The report says no justification is given as to why there should be only one control centre in each English region. It says "...neither business case fully addresses why there has been a selection of 9 regional control centres....Since resilience is now a major factor to be considered, a relatively small number like 9 controls may also present a risk in the face of co-ordinated terror attacks or the potential for systems failure. The rationale for the choice of 9 control centres needs to be better justified and explained in the business case."

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 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.

FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said: "We have long-standing concerns about this project and worry the Government is proceeding on the basis that it will be all right on the night. There is widespread concern in the fire service that Government will decide to press ahead and leave us to pick up the pieces as best we can.

"There is a very real concern that the true costs of this will project turn out to be greater than Government currently estimates. If that happens it will have to be paid for by raising Council Tax or make savings through cuts in local frontline fire services.

"We do not believe that major decisions should be made without knowing the whole picture about costs or savings and before the project is thoroughly re-assessed. The Government needs to examine where the gaps are and where this project goes from here."

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