



LOSING CONTROL?

CUTS, CLOSURES AND CHALLENGES IN UK FIRE CONTROLS

FIRE BRIGADES UNION APRIL 2017

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Section one: The changing landscape of fire control.....	5
Section two: System failings in emergency fire controls	11
Section three: Understaffing, stress, sickness and shift pattern changes.....	16
Conclusions.....	19
Recommendations.....	20
Table 1: UK Fire controls.....	21
Table 2: UK Fire controls systems.....	23
Table 3: Fire control operators 31 March 2010 – 31 March 2016 (headcount)	24
Table 4: Future Control Room Improvements projects	26
References	27

FOREWORD

Fire control is the epicentre of the fire and rescue service, providing a crucial service to local communities and firefighters attending emergency incidents.

Our control members are hardworking, knowledgeable and dedicated professionals who are keeping things together through their sheer determination and dedication under extremely difficult circumstances. Too often, they are taken for granted and undervalued by fire and rescue services, bosses and politicians.

Control staff have been subjected to more than a decade of failed government policy, characterised by cuts, mergers and under-investment. New supposedly 'state of the art' mobilising systems are failing, leading to a deterioration in control performance and response times. Understaffing, excessive workloads and imposed shift changes are causing intolerable stress and anxiety which is impacting on both the health and welfare of control staff and on public safety. The culmination of these factors has left many control rooms across the UK at breaking point.

The FBU have produced this report to highlight the challenges in UK fire controls, and the effect this is having upon our members in control, on fire stations and on public safety. We hope that this report will help fire and rescue stakeholders to better understand the scale of the issues and work with us to take action.

Matt Wrack,
General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union

Lynda Rowan O'Neill,
Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union's Control Staff National Committee

INTRODUCTION

Fire control operators – firefighter (control) or control staff – are highly-skilled professionals who work in a diverse range of roles across fire and rescue services. Every member plays an important part in protecting local communities from danger, across all roles and ranks.

As well as the vital work of fighting fires, fire and rescue services are also responsible for a variety of other complex threats, ranging from terrorism to large scale accidents and natural hazards. Invariably, the success or failure of the service's response starts with the first call and the abilities of those in control rooms to deal with it.

THE ROLE OF A FIRE CONTROL OPERATOR

Fire control operators are the very first point of contact in an emergency, tasked with obtaining as much information as possible about the incident, evaluating the situation, providing life-saving advice to callers and mobilising the correct resources to deal with the emergency as quickly and efficiently as possible. They have an in-depth knowledge of local risks and operational procedures, and are highly trained to deal with a vast range of incidents from fires, road traffic collisions and flooding to terrorist attacks and chemical spills.

These critical fire and rescue service personnel are also tasked with monitoring the availability of fire appliances and their movements, to ensure stations are adequately covered across the service area. They allocate resources and back up to operational firefighters at the scene, organise relief crews and maintain radio and telephone contact with all relevant personnel and agencies. During times when control staff are not dealing with operational incidents, they are busy dealing with core administration work and maintaining competencies.

AUSTERITY AND BUDGETS CUTS

The fire and rescue service faces unprecedented threats. Most local services have seen their central funding reduced by more than a quarter and the likelihood is that there are further reductions to come. Against this background, the fire and rescue service must find significant savings in order to continue to deliver a fast and effective emergency response.

The pressure of austerity cuts is forcing the pace of organisational and structural change within the fire and rescue service, to the detriment of public and firefighter safety. The cuts and consequent underfunding of the service are the main drivers behind the various initiatives and proposals that have materialised, as fire and rescue authorities endeavour to deliver significant efficiency savings.

LOSING CONTROL?

With the current political climate demanding significant efficiency savings, control arrangements have come under severe pressure, with control operators across the UK shouldering the burden.

In the past six years, a quarter of UK fire control operators and local control rooms have been lost as a result of cuts. New, supposedly 'state of the art' mobilising systems are failing, leading to a deterioration in control performance and response times. Understaffing, excessive workloads, and imposed shift changes are causing intolerable stress and anxiety which is impacting both on the health and welfare of control staff and on public safety.



SECTION ONE:

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF FIRE CONTROL

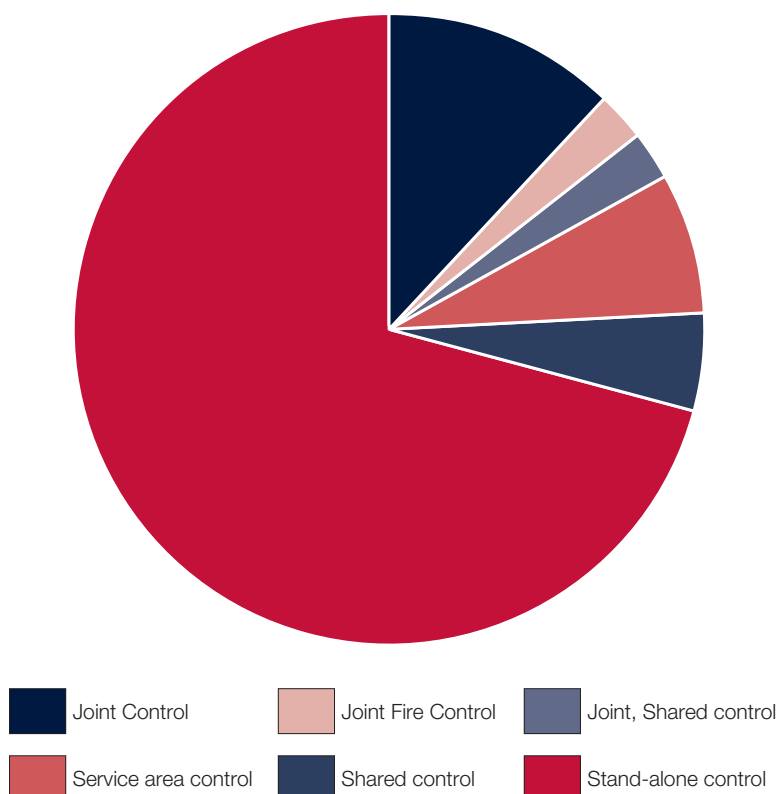
There are 50 fire and rescue services in the UK, each responsible for processing emergency fire calls in their own local authority area and, with agreement, emergency calls from other areas.

In the context of fewer emergency 999 calls and the resulting increase in cost per call handled, fire authorities have come under increasing pressure to rationalise fire control provision. Between 2010 and 2016, there has been a 25% reduction in UK fire control operators and a quarter of fire controls have closed as a result of various structural and organisational changes.

Some 15 fire controls have closed in the UK since 2010: Suffolk (2011) merged with Cambridgeshire; Isle of Wight (2012) outsourced their provision to Surrey; Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Lancashire were replaced by the regional North West Fire Control (2014); Staffordshire merged with West Midlands (2014); East Sussex merged with West Sussex (2014); Dumfries closed as part of Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's rationalisation program (2014), Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire were replaced by the regional Thames Valley Joint Fire Control (2015); Dorset merged with Wiltshire (2015); Mid and West Wales merged with South Wales (2016). Fife, Falkirk and Aberdeen control rooms were closed (2016).

The current range of control arrangements, from stand-alone to a range of joint and shared controls is shown in Figure 1 and in tables 1 and 3 in the appendices.

Figure 1: UK fire controls (January 2017)



STAND-ALONE CONTROLS

At present, the majority of UK fire and rescue services continue to operate their own fire control rooms, opting for networked forms of collaboration, designed to achieve savings and improve resilience within their existing structures.

Following the demise of the failed, ill-thought-out and expensive FiReControl project in England, fire and rescue services have invested central funding in technology to strengthen their strategic alliances to facilitate more coherent resource sharing. Through shared procurement of 'state of the art' mobilising systems, partner controls are meant to be able to seamlessly handle each other's calls and mobilise appliances to incidents across service boundaries during busy periods or in the event that a control room becomes incapacitated for any reason.

These systems are intended to encompass in-built resilience, with the capacity to accommodate the workload and personnel from other local services. This has prompted many fire authorities to dispose of rarely-used secondary controls, achieving savings from the associated infrastructure and maintenance.

Fire authorities have also used the freedom to pool resources to justify cuts to day-to-day control establishment and minimum crewing levels, resulting in the perception of networked controls as "regionalisation through the back door".

Using networked capabilities as the basis for staffing cuts has proven to be a short-sighted and reckless decision. The implementation of new, untested technology has been subject to significant delays, whilst many of the complete projects have proven to be inherently unstable, causing severe disruptions due to system faults. As one FBU control member in an affected networked control noted:

"Management promised the new mobilising system would cut down on work by around 20% (one of the reasons for the job losses) but all I've seen so far is the amount of work and stresses on staff increase ten-fold. We have substantially less capacity to handle core administrative functions which ensure the operational effectiveness of the service and do not have the numbers to cope with system faults."

These issues are considered in detail in sections two and three of this report.

JOINT FIRE CONTROLS

The preference for stand-alone controls engaged in virtual collaboration has been derided as “status quo plus” by the more hawkish analysts who feel that the efficiencies achieved are insufficient. The 2013 Knight Review stated:

“Almost half of authorities have invested in shared systems but have declined to take the natural step of merging control rooms, teams and operational practices.... [Savings] also come from a single location and fewer staff – this is where ongoing revenue savings can and should be made. The reduction in call volume and the fact that there is no need to be geographically adjacent as some collaborations have shown, means that there can be little efficiency in small services in particular retaining their own control room.”

Control room consolidation has been the central tenet of rationalisation for the past twenty years. Knight advocated the benefits of “sharing the IT systems, staff and premises, especially in an environment of shrinking call volumes”.¹

This was the premise of the ill-fated FiReControl project in England which aimed to replace the 46 local fire and rescue services control rooms with nine regional centres. Following the cancellation of the project and in the context of unprecedented budget cuts, several fire and rescue authorities concluded that maintaining their own controls had become unviable, leading them to establish their own joint provision.

Since 2010, 17 fire and rescue services have consolidated their control rooms into seven joint fire control centres through locally determined agreements and partnerships. The national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) – which formed as the result of an amalgamation of eight local fire and rescue services – is in the process of consolidating eight controls into three, covering North, East and West Scotland.

Joint controls also face the considerable challenge of harmonising operational procedures, working practices and standards. Fire control operators work at the very heart of their local fire and rescue service, drawing upon an in-depth understanding of all local working procedures which have evolved through experience. Although broad guidance is issued at national level, integrated risk management necessarily varies from service to service, to take into account the different local circumstances of service areas. Amalgamation may also weaken links between control and their constituent fire and rescue services through fewer relationships and less management based on local structure.

The creation of joint controls has invariably involved job losses in the medium to long term due to cuts to control establishment. This follows the reasoning that through combining controls, more staff will be available to handle calls. However, simply sharing control rooms does not necessarily increase resilience – arguably it could reduce it as the impact of a single control room failure would be spread over a wider geographical area.

Job losses may also arise due to the inability of some staff to transfer to new control rooms due to the distance involved. As a result, the majority of experienced staff in joint controls will come from a limited geographical radius of the control room’s location, resulting in a loss of experience and local knowledge of the other services’ area. Although there is no requirement for control operators to demonstrate in-depth local knowledge of the service area, which is not part of a control operator’s role map, it often proves to be invaluable. This is because despite having access to sophisticated tracking technology, fire control operators cannot pinpoint exactly where someone is calling from.

As Lynda Rowan O'Neill, secretary of the FBU's Control Staff National Committee (CSNC) explains:

"Identifying the location of an incident is crucial to providing a speedy response, preventing the spread of fire or damage and saving lives. Many people don't know their location when they phone in an emergency. It makes the task of mobilising very challenging, especially when the caller is distressed and panicking."

"So much of the job is based on local knowledge. I know where the road that the pub you passed a few minutes ago is on, even if you don't. I know which motorway junction is nearest, based on the snippet of information you caught out of the corner of your eye on the last sign you passed. I know where the old factory is, despite the fact that it closed down several years ago. I couldn't do my job nearly as well if I were unfamiliar with the area."

Local knowledge has also proven to be imperative when contingency measures have been put in place. If computer systems fail, the knowledge of the control room staff is crucial to continuance in service delivery as documented in part two.

SHARED CONTROLS

Fire authorities have attempted to achieve greater efficiency through horizontal integration with other emergency services. Three fire and rescue services have opted to co-locate their control rooms, sharing facilities and infrastructure whilst retaining their own dedicated staff and separate operating systems. Merseyside Police and Fire and Rescue Service share a command and control centre, Kent Fire Control is based at Kent Police Control, and the newly combined Mid and West Wales and South Wales joint fire control will share a facility with South Wales Police, at force headquarters.²

Establishing shared controls is not a straightforward concept, given the opposing needs, different structures and a lack of co-terminosity between emergency services in many areas. Although police and fire control rooms may appear analogous, they work in very different ways and have different historical backgrounds, ethos and cultures. This is most patently illustrated by division of labour within the respective organisations. Police control rooms are predominantly staffed by civilians, with separate call handling and dispatch roles.³ Conversely, fire controls' call handling and dispatch roles are combined and carried out exclusively by uniformed staff. The dual role of fire control operators reflects the fact that fire controls receive a higher percentage of emergency calls; in an emergency every second counts, and combining call handling and mobilising minimises delays responding.

The requirements of a fire control operator's role requires staff to have a vast knowledge of working procedures and information, to assist firefighters at incidents and carry out a range of other duties behind the scenes to maintain the operational ability of the service. The probationary period within the fire and rescue service is usually two years. These intrinsic differences between the police staff and fire control operators are manifest in different dynamics and pay within control rooms.

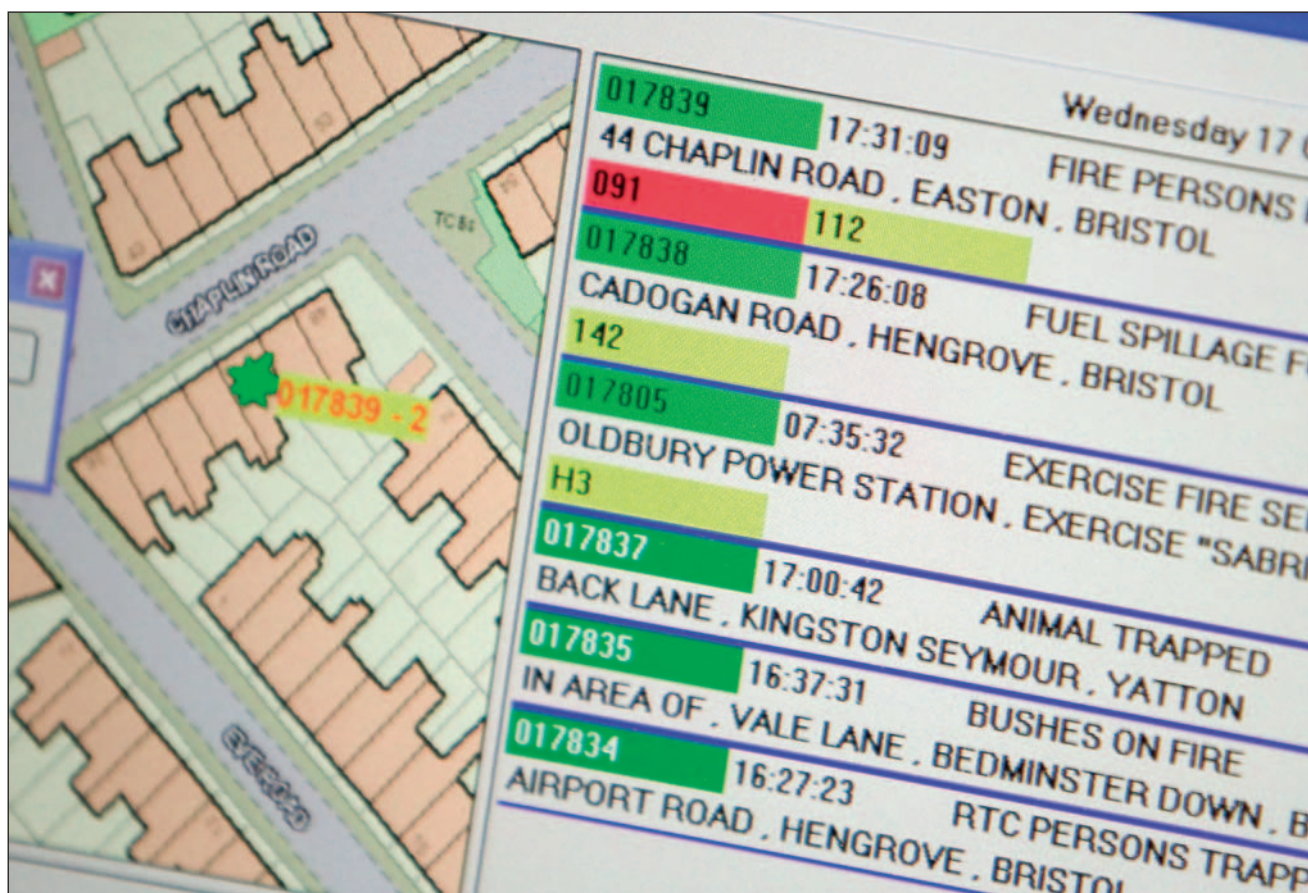
Divergent security requirements of the emergency services are also a significant barrier to further integration due to the additional requirements that apply to police systems and staff. Former Derbyshire Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Alan Charles noted that this limited how far ICT systems could be shared between the police and fire and rescue service.⁴

Heightened security has affected fire control staffing as co-located fire control operators are required to pass a 'Non Police Personnel Vetting' (NPPV) process. This level of vetting is standard practice and a requirement for anyone who has physical or remote access to police premises, information or

intelligence but wouldn't ordinarily be a requirement for fire control operators. Fire control operators are required to undergo these checks prior to appointment which has reportedly extended the lead-time for new recruits by several months, exacerbating staffing issues in some controls where a number of vacancies have arisen as a result of mid-career resignations, part-time working, maternity leave and/or long term sickness. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is also aware of an example where a control operator's security credentials were revoked whilst under police investigation. The individual in question had not been charged with any offence but was denied access to the control room during the investigation period. Whilst rare, this has proven to be a challenge and could be particularly problematic for smaller fire control teams.

The Conservative Westminster government has placed increasing emphasis on greater blue light collaboration, advocating "opportunities" for "co-working, co-location and joint emergency control rooms".⁵ The Policing and Crime Act 2017, imposes a "duty to collaborate" where doing so would improve their efficiency or effectiveness. The Bill also makes provision for a PCC to take responsibility for the fire and rescue service in his or her area where a local case is made (the 'governance' model), as well as to take the additional step to create a single employer for police and fire (the 'single employer' model). A survey in *Policing Insight* magazine found that over half of PCCs support shared police and fire controls, with several PCCs expected to include proposals for shared police-fire controls in their forthcoming business cases.⁶ Given that fire and rescue services have already invested heavily in joint fire-fire control centres and networked partnerships, withdrawing from those structures will require a strong financial argument.

There are concerns about the Emergency Services Network (ESN), the radio system the Home Office intends to implement for police, fire and ambulance services in Great Britain. The new system, to replace Airwave, is not yet in use nationwide anywhere in the world. The Public Accounts Committee at Westminster raised concerns about the costs, timetable and contingency arrangements for this new technology.⁷



OUTSOURCING AND PRIVATISATION

A further approach to rationalisation that has been considered by several fire authorities is outsourcing their control operation and personnel to private sector companies.

Efforts to transfer fire and rescue service assets and services from the public to the private sector have been underway for several years. A litany of recent outsourcing experiments demonstrate that no part of the service, not even the frontline, is immune from the threat of being sold off or contracted out to profit-seeking private companies. This is a worrying prospect that would inevitably mean cuts to the range and quality of services provided – compromising public safety – and the pay and conditions of fire and rescue employees by taking them out of nationally negotiated arrangements.⁸

In 2012, London Fire Brigade (LFB) was on the verge of becoming the first UK fire and rescue service to outsource its emergency call handling and mobilisation. Under Mayor Boris Johnson's leadership, the Greater London Authority awarded Capita a ten-year contract to take over its control centre – constructed and equipped at public expense – and around 120 existing LFB staff, who would be transferred to the company.

Control is an integral component of the lifesaving fire and rescue service and the proposal unsurprisingly elicited widespread concern from across the political spectrum and fire and rescue sector. Allowing shareholders of a company with little track record of handling emergency calls, who have a terrible record of public sector delivery would seriously compromise public safety. It would leave the brigade without its own staff trained in emergency response services, and would separate the service from brigade management structures.

Following the departure of the conservative chair of London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), Brian Coleman, the decision was reviewed by the committee who noted that “the Brigade already has two ‘risk critical’ external, private sector providers, one of which is clearly struggling” and that “outsourcing fire control would impose new high financial risks on the capital's fire and rescue service”. As a result, LFEPA concluded that “the risks of proceeding with this outsourcing proposal outweigh any likely advantages” and the decision was made to award a contract to Capita for a replacement mobilising solution, rather than a fully managed outsourced service.⁹

Whilst industrial and political action has successfully prevented the encroachment of privateers into fire controls to date, there can be no complacency. Several police forces have outsourced their control function to private sector companies; with legislation that will enable PCCs to take over fire and rescue services making its way through parliament, privatisation of fire control delivery remains a key concern.¹⁰

SECTION TWO: SYSTEM FAILINGS IN EMERGENCY FIRE CONTROLS

In the last few years, the fire and rescue service has sought to upgrade their aging control systems, by investing in new, state of the art technology that would enable faster and more effective deployment of resources, facilitate greater interoperability and strengthen resilience. The new generation of control solutions were commissioned at local level, on a large bespoke basis with unique characteristics particular to the individual organisation. After protracted delays, many fire controls have now gone live with new systems but have encountered a litany of faults, causing severe disruption to emergency call handling and mobilisation.

THE FAILURE OF THE FIRECONTROL PROJECT

The background to the epidemic of failing command and control systems lies in the unsuccessful FiReControl project.

The FiReControl project was conceived by the last Labour government in 2004 with the aim of replacing all of England's 46 fire and rescue services' local control rooms with nine purpose-built regional control centres linked by a single, national IT system. The FBU vociferously raised concerns about the obvious flaws in the proposals from the outset, including the reliance on unproven technology and use of private finance initiatives (PFI). After years of faltering expectation on what FiReControl might finally deliver, it ultimately proved to be an overly ambitious and undeliverable project. Beleaguered by mismanagement, repeated problems and delays, it was finally terminated in December 2010, at a cost of £500m in taxpayer's funding.

In anticipation of FiReControl, many fire authorities had delayed investment in control for it would not have been a prudent use of public funds to replace or enhance systems, beyond that which was absolutely necessary in order to maintain business continuity, in parallel with the massive public investment in regional centres. Following the cancellation of the project, these fire and rescue services faced the urgent task of replacing their tired, if not obsolete, legacy control rooms.

CENTRALLY FUNDED, LOCALLY DETERMINED SOLUTIONS

In 2011, DCLG consulted on the future of fire control rooms. The coalition government subsequently announced £81 million in grants available to fire authorities across England to "improve the efficiency and strengthen the resilience of their local control services".¹¹

In the new era of localism and against the backdrop of the disastrous, top down approach to the FiReControl project, it fell to fire and rescue authorities to organise themselves and deliver their own control solutions with central funding. This has resulted in a patchwork of differing approaches as each fire and rescue authority had its own requirements and expectation of how a new system would deliver their services and support national resilience. In total, 22 projects from 44 fire and rescue service proposals (including 15 partnerships) were commissioned alongside London (with separate funding).

At the outset, DCLG confidently declared that, "The vast majority of fire and rescue authorities are planning to procure systems and functionality that are likely to equal the resilience that would have been provided by FiReControl" and that they expected all projects would be completed by 31 March 2014.¹²

DELAYS IN DELIVERY

Overhauling systems is notoriously problematic, as evidenced by the long-history of failed public sector ICT schemes. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that future fire control room projects have experienced numerous setbacks, delaying implementation significantly. To date, four projects remain over 18 months after the scheme was due to complete.¹³

With responsibility for delivering the improvements resting at local level, there has been very little central oversight of the challenges of implementing the future fire control room scheme. DCLG's assessment that the projects "continue to make steady progress" was not shared by the FBU national control staff committee, given that transfers to new systems had been postponed due to a failure to resolve serious, safety critical faults that would put firefighters and members of the public at risk.

SYSTEM FAULTS AND FAILINGS

More worryingly however, many controls have encountered significant faults after going live with new systems, causing severe disruption to fire control emergency 999 call handling and mobilisation.

Frequently reported problems with mobilising systems include:

- Screens freezing whilst taking emergency calls, requiring a reboot of the entire system
- Slow speeds, rendering the system unworkable
- Appliances wrongly being recorded as unavailable, resulting in other appliances further away being mobilised and taking much longer to arrive than had the nearest available appliance been selected
- Inability to match address, preventing appliances from being mobilised
- Incorrect or absent information printed on mobilising messages (including address of incidents and risk information)
- Relief orderings not presented at station
- Officers not receiving pager messages.

Despite efforts by management to downplay these failings as "teething troubles" and "bedding issues", the reality is that in many controls not one week has passed where a serious issue with the system has not been encountered and reported months, in some cases over a year, since the new system went live.

CASE STUDIES

The Networked Fire Control Services Partnership (NFCSP) is a single command and control system for the fire and rescue services in **Devon and Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire, and Hampshire**. It is underpinned by Capita's Vision DS communications and control technology, which serves a single system networked to serve local control rooms in Exeter (Devon and Somerset), Potterne (Dorset and Wiltshire) and Eastleigh (Hampshire).

The purpose of this system is to allow the three fire and rescue services to work closely together, "sharing resources during busy periods or a major incident, and helping to enhance service levels while improving public and firefighter safety", according to the joint press release issued on 3 May 2016. The partnership is also estimated to save the three services £16.91m by 2024. To date around £8m of public money has been spent on this project.

Since the introduction of the new system, the control rooms involved have experienced a number of serious problems including a series of major breakdowns. The issues became so severe that in the summer of 2016, the FBU took the unusual step of writing to all of the members of the fire authorities within the NFCSP area outlining concerns over "the major system failures which have become a regular occurrence". These major system failures included 'evacuations' of staff from Potterne to Exeter when the Dorset and Wiltshire control suffered total failure, alongside severe communication and major server failures.

These major system failures caused control staff intolerable levels of stress, and the operational effectiveness and efficiency of the fire and rescue services involved were placed at severe risk. Increased sickness levels amongst staff were exacerbated by the resultant increased overtime being worked to cover shortages. Many of the staff affected by major vision system failures received Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) team briefing.

The instability and unreliability of the system was such that there was an overwhelming reliance on emergency fire control staff to use their own personal initiative in order to attempt to mobilise the correct number of appliances, from the right location, to an emergency incident when the system failed. This created severe, intolerable and unfair levels of stress.

Operational staff had little or no confidence in this system and regarded it as both ineffective and dangerous. There was a common concern raised constantly by our members with the union that the instability and unreliability of this system will contribute to the death or serious injury of a member of the public, or of the service, unless decisive and swift action was taken.

Senior managers and politicians within the services involved have been taking these issues very seriously and are pressing Capita for a solution. This has resulted in far greater stability of the system since 2016. However problems still persist and there is a serious lack of confidence in the system amongst emergency fire control staff who operate it and operational firefighters who rely on it for mobilisation to emergency incidents.

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service's control went live with the new Remsdaq Resque 4i and Frequentis mobilising solution in January 2015. However, there were a significant number of functional, performance and availability issues with it during the first two months of the Essex operation, resulting in a number of near misses. In Basildon, it took over an hour for an engine to be mobilised to a woman who was trapped in a lift. In Colchester an engine from further away was mobilised to an emergency and so took much longer to arrive. Most worryingly was when a 999 call was received for a house fire in Orsett and the mobilising commands from the new control room to the fire station were not received.

This substantially delayed the emergency response, with just 71% of calls handled within the target time of 90 seconds. Essex fire authority conceded that “this is worse than the previous year and worse than target”. Against the mounting evidence the decision was finally made for Essex to revert back to the old Resque NX system at the end of March 2015 and postpone the Bedfordshire implementation. As one Essex control operator put it:

“We knew that this so called ‘state of the art’ system was increasing risk to the public and our firefighter colleagues. We were in constant fear and after several near misses, were desperate for management to get a grip of the situation. Instead, management downplayed the technical issues as ‘a few teething troubles’ before blaming ‘user error’ – us! These accusations compounded the stress and anxiety we were suffering, and left us feeling belittled and demoralised. The truth was that the new system was simply not fit for purpose.”

London Fire Brigade’s control went live on the Capita Vision 4 platform in November 2015. A year on, control continue to experience faults that cause severe disruption on a routine basis. Former London Fire Commissioner Ron Dobson conceded that on five separate occasions, the faults have slowed the control system down and crashed to the extent that it was impacting on mobilising, and so secondary contingency protocols were initiated (with staff having to use pen and paper to mobilise resources).¹⁴

The Thames Valley Combined Control joint committee found that Capita software conflicts caused issues with systems performance and response times, and that as a result, the Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) is now implementing its own solution.

WORK AROUNDS

Control members are working under extreme pressure, using systems that constantly fail and, frequently resorting to ‘work around’ measures in order to mobilise resources. On these occasions, it is only by the skill, professionalism and initiative of control staff that an emergency response is provided at all.

This has substantially increased control workload and invariably impacted on response times as the following accounts given by FBU control reps demonstrate:

“System faults, causing a severe slowdown in our control server speed, are leading to delays mobilising appliances, appliances being ‘locked’ in position and unavailable to be tasked. This recently caused difficulties mobilising specialist resources to a significant incident in our area at a high-risk location.”

“The system is frequently so slow it is unworkable. My colleagues and I have been left with no option but to take details of emergency fire calls by pen and paper and physically telephone fire station landlines to mobilise appliances, inputting the full details later when the computer had caught up. We rely on our local knowledge of the area, combined with lists of stations and maps pinned to the control room wall in order to decide which appliance to send. When this happens, call handing times increase with a knock on effect on response times.”

“On several occasions, we have been unable to match an address, and thus, unable to mobilise appliances. Due to the sheer scale of the fault, management made the decision to divert emergency calls to our partner control rooms by letting the calls ring without answering them so that after a period of time, the call is routed to a partner control room to answer and take mobilising actions as required. We have had several near misses including a substantial persons reported domestic fire”.

The aforementioned cases offer a glimpse into the technological issues and system failures in fire controls, and how control operators are forced to initiate ‘work arounds’ unbecoming of a modern, professional fire and rescue service. Names, locations of incidents and details of the services involved have been withheld in order to protect FBU control members.

STRIVING FOR A RESOLUTION

Fire control operators have been under considerable strain using these intrinsically flawed systems. Sickness levels in control due to stress related illness has increased in some areas over the last year, as has the number of staff being referred to the occupational health departments due to stress. These concerns are explored in more detail in section three.

When DCLG was responsible for the fire and rescue service, it steadfastly downplayed system defects by failing to give a full account of the nature and extent of the problems experienced.

In January 2016, responsibility for fire and rescue policy was transferred from DCLG to the Home Office. In a welcome move, the Home Office committed to providing further support and engagement through regular meetings with the remaining projects and their suppliers. However, it is clear that this offer needs to be extended to other fire and rescue services whose “completed” projects have proved to be inherently unstable – and to consulting directly with fire control operators, particularly FBU control reps.

The FBU has raised serious concerns about the functionality of new mobilising systems at a local and national level, stressing both the seriousness of the situation and the urgency of putting in place an effective solution. There has however, been a failure by the suppliers to rectify them in any proper manner. In fact, in many controls, it seems that when one issue is resolved, it simply triggers a further series of failures in other parts of the system. It would appear that the serious failures of the system are escalating in some controls where the ongoing problems and instability have reached crisis point.



IAN MARLOW

SECTION THREE:

UNDERSTAFFING, STRESS, SICKNESS AND SHIFT PATTERN CHANGES IN EMERGENCY FIRE CONTROLS

Reduced staffing levels, coupled with the expansion of fire and rescue services' remit has led to an ever-increasing workload and job scope for fire and rescue services. However it is evident that in many control rooms, insufficient allowance has been made for peak workloads, administrative functions and emergent work.

CUTS AND UNDERSTAFFING

Staffing is the biggest fire and rescue service expenditure, typically representing three-quarters of total spending.¹⁵ In the context of unprecedented budget cuts, fire and rescue services are looking at ways they can improve the efficiency of their staffing arrangements to deliver the significant savings required.

The National Audit Office report into the financial sustainability of fire and rescue services in England found that net savings to date have come exclusively from reductions in staffing costs, with total spending on employees between 2010-11 and 2014-15 falling by 14.9% in real terms.¹⁶

Although staff costs have reduced partly as a result of the national wage freeze, the main source was the reduction in staffing numbers, which have been greatest in fire control.

Official government statistics show that in the past six years, a quarter of fire control operators have been lost (see Table A):

Table A: Fire control operators 2010-2016 (head count)¹⁷

Region	2010	2016	Change	%
UK	2,008	1,500	-508	-25%
England	1,592	1,126	-466	-29%
Northern Ireland	58	53	-5	-9%
Scotland	234	203	-31	-13%
Wales	124	118	-6	-5%

The falling number of calls, coupled with the ability to pool personnel in networked, shared and joint controls, has been used as a justification for rationalisation of fire control operators working across the UK.

Determining levels of fire and rescue service resources based on cost rather than risk is a fundamentally flawed notion. One visible incident can generate numerous calls and fill control room capacity within seconds. This is epitomised by the widespread flooding in December 2015 where at least ten fire control rooms experienced spate conditions. North West fire control, which covers Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Lancashire, received over one thousand calls on 5-7 December and over 1,200 calls on 26-27 December. In the latter case, it had to draw upon primary and secondary back up arrangements, which included control rooms in London and the West Midlands fielding calls because of high volume. The hard work and professionalism of control staff in deploying resources ensured anxious members of the public received assistance and a life-saving service.¹⁸

Moreover, deriving staffing numbers on the basis of calls received is an overly simplistic measure that only considers call taking and dispatch, and doesn't take into account the significant post-mobilising work to support the ongoing needs of an incident, such as an ever-increasing requirement to liaise with and coordinate a response from other FRS departments and outside agencies. This approach is also to the disservice of the other essential work that takes place in controls. In addition to handling emergency 999 calls, fire control staff carry out a variety of duties, essential for resilience and business continuity. This includes staff management, equipment management, administrative duties and maintaining operational cover.

In many controls, insufficient allowance has been made for administrative function, essential to the operational effectiveness of the fire and rescue service. In London where control staff also have the Fire and Rescue Service National Co-ordination Centre (FRSNCC) to contend with, staffing shortages in control mean that they have not been able to provide the centre with the required number of staff.¹⁹ The FBU control staff national committee have reported that this is a source of significant friction.

More worryingly, a shortage of staff has impacted the ability of control to provide key operational support to firefighters dealing with incidents in progress. This was the case in West Yorkshire in July 2016 when two large scale fires occurred simultaneously, alongside several smaller incidents. As a result of cuts, there were not enough control staff available to contact 'recall' crews (firefighters on a list willing to come in off-shift if needed). Networked controls do not provide the requisite support to facilitate such tasks. Therefore, whilst it may appear that best value could be achieved by cutting fire control operators, this is to ignore many of the core functions of a fire control and to misunderstand the back up and support roles which are vital to the operation of an effective and efficient fire and rescue service.

MINIMUM STAFFING AND SUPERVISORY LEVELS

In addition to cuts, issues relating to understaffing have been exacerbated by sickness absences, poor management of flexible/part time working options, mid-career resignations and retirement. Control staff are working considerable overtime to address shortfalls in crewing levels, with many reporting that they feel obliged to accept extra shifts to assist their struggling colleagues. However, the additional amount of hours worked is increasing the stress felt by control staff, leading to exhaustion. Given that stress was one of the factors that caused the shortage of staff in the first place, excessive overtime is not sustainable.

As a result many controls are frequently operating below the agreed minimum crewing level and/or supervisory levels. As one FBU control member noted:

"The pressure has become so severe that it is damaging staff wellbeing. There's a high turnover of staff and many colleagues end up off sick with stress. We are supposed to have four people on duty but quite often, there are only three. It used to be more but many people have moved on, exhausted after working 60-hour weeks to cover shortfalls, and haven't been replaced."

In 2015, 21% of shifts in Merseyside fire control did not meet their minimum staffing level of 6 control operators. On some occasions, there were just 4 members of staff.

The FBU's control staff national committee are concerned that management are failing to address the underlying issues and provide awaited resources to help affected staff. Although some fire and rescue services have arranged counselling sessions, there is often not sufficient provision available.

SHIFT PATTERN CHANGES

Unprecedented budget cuts coupled with staffing issues, resulting in chronic control deficiencies and spiralling overtime costs, has prompted many fire and rescue services to review shift patterns in an attempt to cut costs.

Traditionally, the majority of wholetime control staff have worked a 2-2-4 shift pattern based on 42 hours over the course of the week, consisting of two shorter days and two longer nights followed by four rest (“rota”) days. Control staff were organised into watches corresponding with station watches to promote consistency and enable firefighters and control operators to develop good working relationships. Each watch would consist of several control operators, depending on the service, and one or more watch managers and crew managers.

Introducing new flexible crewing and rostering arrangements has invariably seen the length of day shifts increase in parallel with shorter night shifts. More frequently, this has resulted in day and night shifts of 12 hours, the minimum night shift length as set out in the existing NJC terms and conditions for firefighters (the Grey Book).

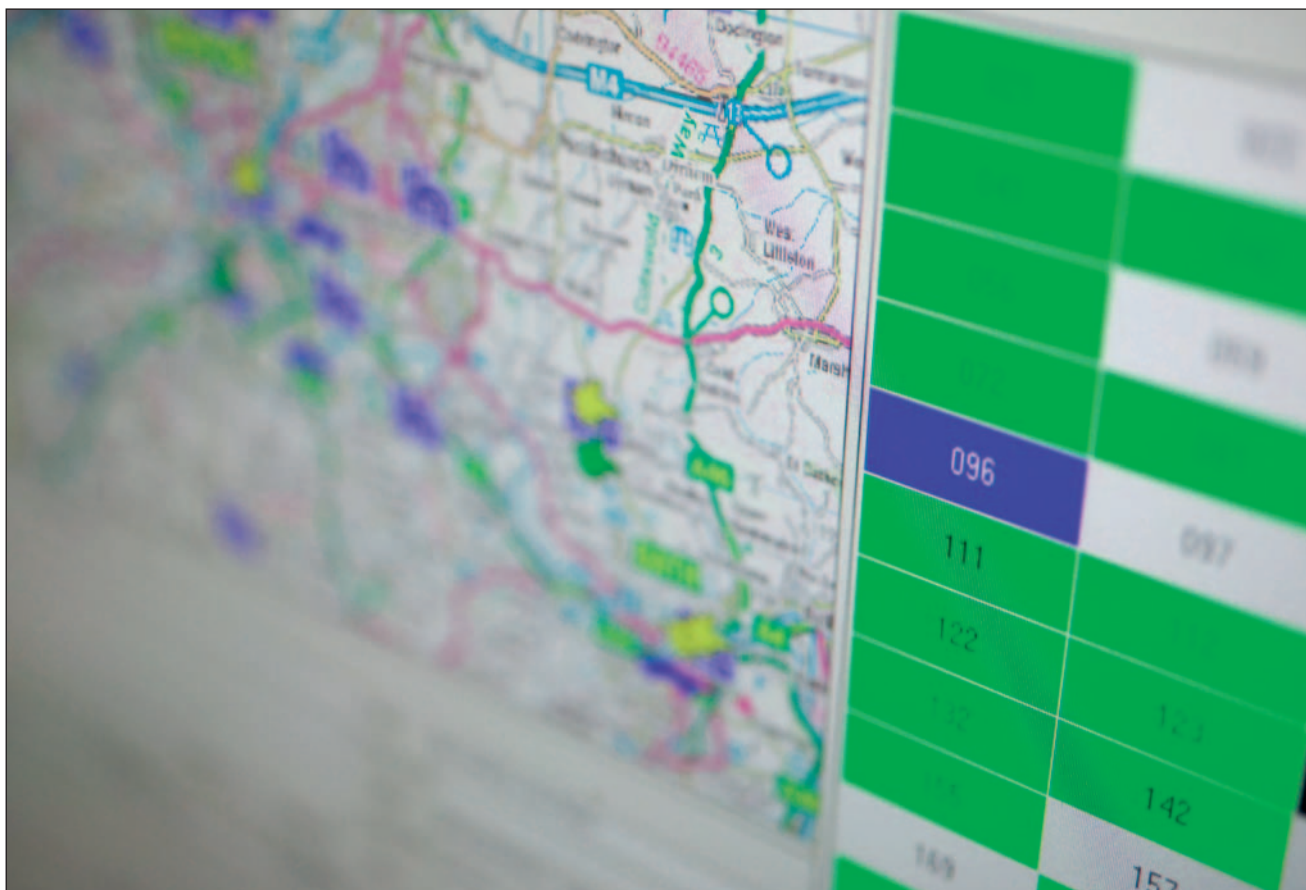
In many controls, FBU members have found the new shift systems to be disruptive to family life, unnecessarily inflexible and discouraging of diversity and equal opportunities. Over 75% of control staff are women, many of whom have childcare or caring commitments.²⁰ The majority of FBU control members agreed that the 2-2-4 shift system is family friendly, as it allows them to adequately manage personal commitments including child care. The FBU is extremely concerned that shift pattern changes have effectively forced some mothers out of the workplace. The union is worried that it will discourage the recruitment and retention of women control operators.



IAN MARLOW

CONCLUSIONS

- 1) Fire and rescue control staff do an irreplaceable job in challenging circumstances. Politicians should recognise the importance of this role in ensuring a world-class fire and rescue service across the UK.
- 2) Control staff have been subjected to more than a decade of failed government policy, beginning with the disastrous FiReControl project, which attempted to impose a regional model and untried technology, followed by the years of cuts, mergers and under-investment. This has left many control rooms across the UK at breaking point.
- 3) Ad hoc arrangements for stand-alone controls, joint and shared controls are not robust enough to tackle the problems facing control staff in the period ahead. Outsourcing/privatisation would be a disastrous development, putting the lives of the public and firefighters at risk. Police and crime commissioners and other bodies seeking to make savings by amalgamating fire control with other services similarly risk disrupting the emergency services and damaging fire cover.
- 4) Widespread technological failure, both from outdated old systems and from badly-developed, untested new systems, have damaged control room resilience. Technology providers have not delivered on the grandiose promises in the day-to-day functioning of control rooms across the UK.
- 5) Continued, planned, austerity-driven under-investment in the fire and rescue service will inevitably damage the resilience of control rooms, put control staff under greater pressure and increase the risk of a major failure during spate conditions.
- 6) Reduced control staff, mergers, poor technology, shift changes and management pressure are adversely affecting the health of control staff.



REPORT/DIGITAL/PAUL BOX

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The Home Office have committed to providing further support and engagement through regular meetings with the remaining projects and their suppliers. This offer should be extended to other fire and rescue services whose “completed” projects have proved to be inherently unstable. Government officials should consult with fire control operators, particularly FBU control reps.
- 2) The Home Office should undertake a control resilience review. This should consider the modern context in which fire controls operate and specifically modern pressures; staffing levels and control room structures with a view to ensuring appropriate and sufficient expert and managerial levels are maintained; and the impact of terrorism and major events on control.
- 3) The Westminster and devolved governments must invest in fire control as part of a wider programme of funding fire and rescue services in every corner of the UK.
- 4) The Scottish fire and rescue service should audit the recent changes in control across Scotland, with substantial input from the FBU as the representative body for control staff in order to determine priorities across the country.
- 5) The Welsh government, local fire and rescue services and FBU reps should carry out a joint inspection of control in Wales, to assess the impact of new working arrangements on the public and on control staff.
- 6) Fire and rescue services should increase the number of control staff to resilient levels, to ensure there is sufficient cover for peak workloads and absences.
- 7) Fire and rescue services should review their support arrangements for stress and other health management issues.
- 8) Proposals to alter shift patterns for control staff must consider the equality and work-life balance implications before changes are implemented. That means negotiating fully with control staff through their representative body, the FBU, in order to reach an agreement on any alterations.
- 9) Fire and rescue services should increase the support available to fulfil control staff flexible working and part time working requests in order to aid recruitment, and thereby maintain an experienced, flexible and diverse workforce.

APPENDICES

Table 1: UK Fire controls

Control	Structure	Constituent services
Avon FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Bedfordshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Cambridgeshire and Suffolk Combined Fire Control	Joint control	Cambridgeshire FRS; Suffolk FRS;
Cleveland Fire Brigade	Stand-alone control	–
Cornwall FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Derbyshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Devon and Somerset FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Dorset and Wiltshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Durham and Darlington FRS	Stand-alone control	–
East Scotland Fire Control	Service area control	Scottish FRS
Essex County FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Gloucestershire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Hampshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Hereford and Worcester FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Hertfordshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Humberside FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Joint Fire Control Centre, Bridgend	Joint, Shared control	Mid and West Wales FRS (joint); South Wales FRS (joint); South Wales Police (shared)
Kent FRS	Shared control	Kent FRS; Kent Police;
Leicestershire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Lincolnshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
London Fire Brigade	Stand-alone control	–
Merseyside Joint Command and Control Centre	Shared control	Merseyside FRS; Merseyside Police
Norfolk FRS	Stand-alone control	–
North Scotland Fire Control	Service Area control	Scottish FRS
North Wales FRS	Stand-alone control	–
North West Fire Control	Joint Fire Control	Cheshire FRS; Cumbria FRS; Manchester FRS; Cumbria FRS
North Yorkshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Northamptonshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Northern Ireland FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Northumberland FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Nottinghamshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Shropshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–

Table 1: UK Fire controls (continued)

Control	Structure	Constituent services
South Yorkshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire Control	Joint control	Staffordshire FRS; West Midlands FRS
Surrey FRS	Joint control	Surrey; Isle of Wight
Sussex Control Centre	Joint control	East Sussex FRS; West Sussex FRS
Thames Valley Combined Fire Control	Joint control	Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes FRS; Oxford FRS; Royal Berkshire FRS
Tyne and Wear FRS	Stand-alone control	–
Warwickshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–
West Scotland Fire Control	Service area control	Scottish FRS
West Yorkshire FRS	Stand-alone control	–

Table 2: UK Fire controls systems

Control	System
Avon FRS	Capita Vision 4
Bedfordshire FRS	Remsdaq NX
Cambridgeshire and Suffolk Combined Fire Control	Remdaq NX
Cleveland Fire Brigade	SEED
Cornwall FRS	Capita Vision 4
Derbyshire FRS	Systel
Devon and Somerset FRS	Capita Vision 4
Dorset and Wiltshire FRS	Capita Vision 4
Durham and Darlington FRS	Guardian Command 3TC
East Scotland Fire Control	Capita Vision 3
Essex County FRS	Remsdaq NX
Gloucestershire FRS	Capita Vision 4
Hampshire FRS	Capita Vision 4
Hereford and Worcester FRS	SEED
Hertfordshire FRS	Capita Vision 3
Humberside FRS	Capita Vision 3
Joint Fire Control Centre, Bridgend	Capita Vision 4
Kent FRS	StereastORM
Leicestershire FRS	Systel
Lincolnshire FRS	Capita Vision 3
London Fire Brigade	Capita Vision 4
Merseyside Joint Command and Control Centre	Capita Vision 4
Norfolk FRS	Capita Vision 3
North Scotland Fire Control	Capita Vision 4
North Wales FRS	Capita Vision 4
North West Fire Control	Intergraph
North Yorkshire FRS	Capita Vision 4
Northamptonshire FRS	Capita Vision 4
Northern Ireland FRS	Procad
Northumberland FRS	Intergraph
Nottinghamshire FRS	Systel
Shropshire FRS	SEED
South Yorkshire FRS	Systel
Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire Control	Capita Vision 4
Surrey FRS	Capita Vision 4
Sussex Control Centre	3TC (East Sussex); Remsdaq NX (West Sussex)
Thames Valley Combined Fire Control	Capita Vision 4
Tyne and Wear FRS	Intergraph
Warwickshire FRS	Vision 4
West Scotland Fire Control	Procad
West Yorkshire FRS	Systel

Table 3: Fire control operators 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2016 (headcount)

	2010	2016	Change	%
Scotland	234	203	-31	-13%
Northern Ireland	58	53	-5	-9%
Cleveland	34	21	-13	-38%
Durham	25	28	3	12%
Northumberland	22	17	-5	-23%
Tyne and Wear	53	32	-21	-40%
Humberside	34	31	-3	-9%
North Yorkshire	25	22	-3	-12%
South Yorkshire	42	27	-15	-36%
West Yorkshire	59	41	-18	-31%
Cheshire	26	0	-26	-100%
Cumbria	22	0	-22	-100%
Lancashire	43	2	-41	-95%
Greater Manchester	69	0	-69	-100%
North West Fire Control	0	59	59	
Merseyside	49	33	-16	-33%
Derbyshire	25	25	0	0%
Leicestershire	39	22	-17	-44%
Lincolnshire	28	20	-8	-29%
Northamptonshire	20	17	-3	-15%
Nottinghamshire	40	26	-14	-35%
Hereford and Worcester	26	22	-4	-15%
Shropshire	19	18	-1	-5%
Staffordshire	25	0	-25	-100%
Warwickshire	20	17	-3	-15%
West Midlands	65	57	-8	-12%
North Wales	33	32	-1	-3%
Mid and West Wales	35	34	-1	-3%
South Wales	56	52	-4	-7%
Bedfordshire	27	24	-3	-11%
Cambridgeshire	35	43	8	23%
Essex	45	33	-12	-27%
Hertfordshire	29	25	-4	-14%
Norfolk	29	23	-6	-21%
Suffolk	24	0	-24	-100%
Greater London	118	103	-15	-13%
East Sussex	29	49	20	69%
Kent	40	34	-6	-15%
Surrey	31	26	-5	-16%
West Sussex	37	0	-37	-100%
Berkshire	35	39	4	11%

Table 3: Fire control operators 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2016 (headcount) (continued)

	2010	2016	Change	%
Buckinghamshire	25	0	-25	-100%
Hampshire	44	38	-6	-14%
Isle of Wight	13	0	-13	-100%
Oxfordshire	27	0	-27	-100%
Avon	36	37	1	3%
Cornwall	20	18	-2	-10%
Devon and Somerset	65	41	-24	-37%
Dorset	26	1	-25	-96%
Gloucestershire	24	19	-5	-21%
Wiltshire	23	36	13	57%
UK	2008	1500	-508	-25%

Home Office, *Fire and rescue authorities: operational statistics bulletin for England 2015 to 2016*, (27 October 2016); SFRS, *Fire Safety and Organisational Statistics Scotland 2015-16*, (25 August 2016); StatsWales, *Fire and rescue service personnel*, (22 September 2016); NIFRS, *Annual Report* (2009-2010 and 2015-2016).

Table 4: Future Control Room Improvements projects

Control project	Project completion date ¹	Project completion date ²
Avon	31 March 2014	15 September 2016
Cambridge and Suffolk	31 March 2013	05 August 2014
Cleveland	31 December 2014	31 March 2015
Cornwall and North Yorkshire	31 December 2014	06 July 2016
Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire	31 December 2013	09 December 2015
Devon and Somerset, Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire	31 December 2014	27 April 2016
Durham and Darlington	31 December 2013	03 December 2014
East Sussex and West Sussex ³	31 December 2013	N/A
Essex and Bedfordshire ⁴	31 December 2013	N/A
Gloucestershire	31 December 2013	15 September 2015
Hereford and Worcester, and Shropshire and Wrekin	31 December 2014?	31 December 2014?
Hertfordshire, Humberside, Lincolnshire and Norfolk ⁵	31 December 2014	N/A
Kent and Medway	31 December 2014	31 July 2015
London	31 July 2014	17 November 2015
Manchester, Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria	31 March 2014	28 May 2014
Merseyside	31 December 2014	15 July 2014
Northamptonshire and Warwickshire ⁶	31 December 2014	N/A
Oxfordshire, Royal Berkshire, and Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes	31 March 2014	30 April 2015
South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire	31 December 2014	31 May 2015
Staffordshire and West Midlands	31 March 2014	31 March 2016
Surrey and the Isle of Wight	31 March 2014	31 December 2015
Tyne and Wear and Northumberland	31 December 2013	25 November 2013

¹ Department of Communities and Local Government, *Grant for future control room services: Summary 'National Picture' of fire and rescue authority improvement plans*, (March 2012).

² Home Office, *Future Control Room Improvement: Government update on fire and rescue authority scheme*, (November 2016)

³ The current plan for delivery of the East Sussex and West Sussex project is December 2017.

⁴ Essex and Bedfordshire expect full integration of the system to complete by the end of March 2017.

⁵ The Hertfordshire, Humberside, Lincolnshire and Norfolk project is expected to complete by the end of March 2017.

⁶ The Northamptonshire and Warwickshire project expected to complete by the end of March 2017.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Ken Knight, *Facing the Future: Findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England* (May 2013).
- ² Kent fire control use the same hardware and database as Kent Police but operate on a separate fire module.
- ³ Policy Exchange, *The Cost of Cops: Manpower and deployment in policing*, (2011).
- ⁴ Derbyshire OPCC, *Response to the governments blue light collaboration consultation*, (September 2015).
- ⁵ Home Office, *Enabling closer working between the emergency services consultation*, (September 2015).
- ⁶ CoPaCC, *Police and fire mergers and collaboration*, (November 2016).
- ⁷ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Upgrading emergency service communications*, (18 January 2017).
- ⁸ Terms and conditions of firefighters and control staff are negotiated on a UK-wide basis via the National Joint Council for Local Authorities' Fire and Rescue Services (NJC). The NJC was established by the Home Office, employers and the FBU but is not statutory. The Westminster government proposes that this same choice should remain open to Police and Crime Commissioners, who would need to approach the NJC if they wished to become members.
- ⁹ London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, Minutes of the meeting of 21 June 2012. [<https://moderngov.london-fire.gov.uk/mgAi.apx?ID=668>]
- ¹⁰ Several police control rooms have been outsourced to private sector companies including Cleveland (Steria, 2010) and Lincolnshire (G4S, 2012) where 575 civilian police staff transferred under TUPE arrangements from Lincolnshire Police to G4S Policing Support Services [www.g4s.com/en/Media%20Centre/News/2013/06/24/UK%20Policing%20Support%20Services]. It has been reported that Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire Police have commissioned a feasibility study to examine whether G4S could run their control rooms [www.policeprofessional.com/news.aspx?id=24846, November 2015]
- ¹¹ 44 of the 46 fire and rescue authorities in England submitted bids for the grant for future control room services. London did not submit a bid as alternative arrangements had been agreed previously. The Isles of Scilly did not submit a bid, although Cornwall provides its control room services.
- ¹² DCLG, *Grant for future control room services: Summary 'National Picture' of fire and rescue authority improvement plans*, (March 2012).
- ¹³ Home Office, *Future control room improvements: fire and rescue authority schemes*, (November 2016).
- ¹⁴ London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, Minutes of the meeting 29 September 2016. [<http://moderngov.london-fire.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=3372>]
- ¹⁵ CIPFA, *Fire and Rescue Service Statistics*, (2016).
- ¹⁶ National Audit Office, *Financial sustainability of fire and rescue services*, (5 November 2015).
- ¹⁷ Figures are headcount on 31 March in 2010 and 2016 from officially published sources: Home Office, *Fire and rescue authorities: operational statistics bulletin for England 2015 to 2016*, (27 October 2016); SFRS, *Fire Safety and Organisational Statistics Scotland 2015-16*, (25 August 2016); StatsWales, *Fire and rescue service personnel*, (22 September 2016); NIFRS, *Annual Report (2009-2010 and 2015-2016)*.
- ¹⁸ North West Fire Control, Freedom of Information communications to the FBU, (January and February 2016).

¹⁹ The Fire and Rescue Service National Co-ordination Centre (FRSNCC) is responsible for deploying and co-ordinating National Resilience (NR) appliances and equipment as a co-ordinated national response, so that individual fire and rescue services are able to minimise the impact of major emergencies by working in conjunction with others.

²⁰ Home Office, *Fire and rescue authorities: operational statistics bulletin for England 2015 to 2016*, (27 October 2016); SFRS, *Fire Safety and Organisational Statistics Scotland 2015-16*, (25 August 2016); StatsWales, *Fire and rescue service personnel*, (22 September 2016); NIFRS, *Annual Report* (2009-2010 and 2015-2016).



IAN MARLOW



Bradley House
68 Coombe Road
Kingston upon Thames
Surrey KT2 7AE
twitter: @fbunational
website: www.fbu.org.uk