



**NFCC**  
National Fire  
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The professional voice of the  
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Dame Meg Hillier MP  
Chair of the Public Accounts Committee  
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London  
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Sent via email to: [pubaccom@parliament.uk](mailto:pubaccom@parliament.uk)

12<sup>th</sup> May 2023

Dear Dame Meg,

**FOLLOW UP TO QUESTIONS RAISED AT THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE ON  
THE EMERGENCY SERVICES NETWORK 26 APRIL 2023**

Thank you again for presenting me with the opportunity to give evidence to the committee on the Emergency Services Network (ESN). I write to update the Committee with additional information on the costs to Fire and Rescue Services in relation to the Emergency Services Network (ESN) following specific questions from the Committee (questions 25 – 28).

**The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC)**

The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) is as an overarching body that uniquely represents all fire and rescue services (FRS) in the UK on the national stage with one voice for maximum impact, harnessing the knowledge and expertise across the country and bringing it together for the benefit of all. The NFCC is a non-political organisation and is committed to supporting FRSs as they seek to improve service delivery at a local level. Safety is at the heart of what FRSs do; they provide a 24/7 insurance policy for communities and require excellence in systems and organisations that support this endeavour. The collaboration that the NFCC can encourage, negotiate and support with stakeholders from within the Fire and Rescue Service and beyond recognises that solutions and risk go beyond organisational boundaries, at a national or even international level.

Within the context of the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP), which will deliver the Emergency Services Network (ESN), the NFCC's role is a little more nuanced due to the fact that Fire and Rescue is a policy area devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments. Therefore, for the purposes of this note to the Committee, the NFCC response mostly centres on England and English FRSs which come within the purview of the Home Office.

## The NFCC's perspective of ESN

On behalf of the NFCC, I welcome the opportunity to provide further information to the committee about ESN and our involvement with it. In responding, it must be borne in mind that ESN will deliver the next generation of mission critical communications capability for the emergency services. In doing so it will replace, and therefore need to be at least as good as, if not better than, the extant provision, Airwave. The development of the technology and capability that forms the Airwave system over 20 years ago was very much led by the emergency services in Great Britain, and which now by its very nature sets a high benchmark for ESN to attain.

As highlighted to the Committee, the appetite for data use within the FRS has grown and will continue to grow as platforms and applications continue to be developed that require mobile broadband data (4G and beyond). These range from the ability to transmit imagery, software to assist with incident management, along with the live and dynamic collection of information as part of collaborative efforts with other agencies to improve the safety and wellbeing for citizens and communities. From the very outset, the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), the predecessor organisation to the NFCC, and subsequently the NFCC have recognised that in a technical sense, ESN appears the most appropriate direction of travel for FRS communications. Factoring in the need for increased and improved interoperability with other responding agencies, both voice and data, ESN appears the most effective solution to meet our future communications needs both now and reasonably foreseeable into the next decade.

We recognise that ESN will take readily available standard commercial mobile telephony and augment it to provide the levels of coverage, availability and functionality required for emergency services use, where it will inevitably be regularly deployed in the most testing of circumstances. The enhancements we envisage include:

- Additional coverage for the areas where commercial coverage does not exist to provide near universal coverage across Great Britain
- Priority and pre-emption to ensure that emergency service users can always access the network, even when normal consumers may not.
- Higher levels of security and resilience, especially given the current cyber security landscape, the type of information being passed through ESN, the impact of climate change on the nation and demands upon the emergency services, and the expectations of the public
- Devices that work for the emergency services including being more rugged than most phones, the provision of a push to talk (PTT) or transmit button and appropriate battery life
- A communications application [App] that delivers the full suite of functionality required by the emergency services and our staff
- An air to ground (A2G) capability enabling responders on the ground to interact seamlessly with air assets via ESN, even if FRSs don't have such assets themselves

The NFCC recognises that such enhancements will naturally attract a cost. However, ESN will need to make financial sense if the premium it demands in comparison to a commercial offering appropriately adds value and is viable and attractive for FRSs.

## Airwave Sustainability

The FRS Airwave contract, named Firelink, is a managed service with maintenance and replacement of devices either through obsolescence or normal wear and tear being the responsibility of Airwave, and not a direct cost to Government or Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs). There is currently an Airwave led Programme to replace all handheld devices, the first such since the Firelink contract was let in 2006.

FRAs costs to upgrade Control Systems enabling them to interface with new Airwave technology replacing outdated and obsolete equipment is in the region of £3m until the end of 2026 when the Firelink [Airwave] contract currently expires. Inevitably the Firelink contract and the Airwave service will need to be extended beyond 2026. At this stage, it cannot be predicted for how long, or whether there will be a further need to replace other obsolete equipment and if any associated costs will fall to FRAs.

## ESN Costs to Date

In 2015, when Fire and Rescue (England) came within the auspices of the then DCLG, principles for funding the transition of FRSs onto ESN and off Airwave were agreed between DCLG and FRSs, then working under the CFOA as an overarching body. With responsibility for Fire and Rescue in England moving to the Home Office with a Machinery of Government change in 2016, and the subsequent creation of the NFCC, the policy to these funding principles has not changed.

Firstly, these principles recognised that Programme core costs for English FRSs would be met by Government Department. Secondly, in terms of the non-core costs, which represent the costs of an FRS connecting into ESN, costs for transitioning English FRSs onto ESN and off Airwave would be met by Government, and in particular:

- Equipment will be upgraded or replaced on a like for like basis
- There will be no second costs for dual running where ESN and Airwave will need to run in parallel for a period of time
- Funding will be provided for additional resources and staffing to enable ESN transition where required

Government has funded £20m of ESN related resourcing costs incurred at a National, Regional and local level since the inception of the Programme.

In addition, £6m has been spent so far on infrastructure and services costs, such as Control System upgrades, ESN related IT Security, connectivity in preparation for ESN etc. These costs have been met by Government and do not represent a cost to FRSs.

A small number of FRSs had been using ESN products in live service, such as Connect, the Programme's data product, and the Programme's secure connection with FRS Control Systems. The costs associated with withdrawing from these provisions and migrating to commercial offerings are in the region of £2m and have been, and will be met, both by Government and FRAs.

## Plugging Technology Gaps

Delays to ESN have inevitably meant that FRSs are now implementing and exploring alternative solutions to plug the technology gap, ranging from investment in data services and systems, push to talk applications, through to complex technology to plug coverage gaps to enable greater data use at incidents.

Based upon knowledge of technologies that have already been brought into service, those in the pipeline, and professional judgement on likely FRS investment in Operational Communications technology until the end of the decade, we believe that upwards of £17m will be spent on plugging technology gaps brought about by ESN delays. This estimate we believe to be the lower end of the spectrum given the length of the forward look, and the continual evolution of, and need for, technology, and is probably best summed up by a senior ICT leader within the FRS community [in terms of ESN]:

*'We have been left with a technology gap and, as a consequence, have now resourced a service project running in isolation to ESN. This is looking at currently available comms technology, 5G infrastructure and new devices, whereby the Service can exploit current technology until ESN eventually starts to re-surface. Service 999 comms technologies have pretty much stagnated for a decade while everyone has been waiting for direction from the programme, unwilling to heavily invest if mandated solutions would supersede it. That can't continue for another 5 or 10 years when technology has moved on so much. Therefore, it's inevitable we will be buying into further tech to fill the gap.'*

## Future transition costs

With so many unknowns at this juncture it is impossible to quantify the likely costs for FRSs to transition onto ESN. Whilst these have previously been estimated for the purposes of inclusion within the extant ESN FBC, there has been significant change since, and along with the ongoing adoption of digital technologies within FRSs, the very landscape, and how ESN will integrate and interact with these will change also. The evolution of a revised and realistic ESN timeline will aid greatly and allow us to start to plan with greater certainty for the deployment of ESN into live service.

We will continue to work collectively with the Programme and emergency service colleagues to deliver ESN through its phases and into live service, building upon the significantly improved relationship with Programme leadership.

If you require any further feedback or additional detail, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Ben Norman  
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NFCC Strategic Lead for Operational Communications