

FBU SPEAK



The FiReControl project has been the subject of a parliamentary investigation. FBU general secretary Matt Wrack told the inquiry why the project has failed

The House of Commons communities and local government committee is a mouthful at the best of times. But the committee bit off more than it could chew from the Fire Brigades Union, when it held an investigation into the FiReControl project this year.

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary, was invited to give testimony at a hearing in February, along with ministers, employers' representatives and civil servants. What the

powers that he heard was the truth about FiReControl, plainly spelt out.

Wrack told the committee that the FBU was right to oppose the project from the start "on grounds of its operational usefulness to the fire and rescue service, its threat to the efficiency of the fire and rescue service, because of local accountability and on the basis of cost". He argued that "the previous seven years have just confirmed our position more so than when we started out".

Control staff 'ignored'

Wrack said that a central reason for the failure of FiReControl was that the government had failed to consult with control staff.

"One of the fundamental problems of it from the start," he said, was "that the views of professionals within the service have not been taken into account when developing the project from start to finish.

"The other professional users are the control staff themselves who are experts in

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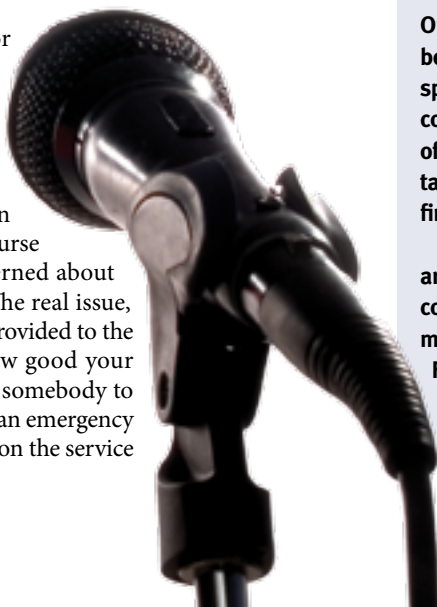


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delivering emergency fire and rescue control rooms currently, whose views have largely been ignored.”

This caused Tory councillor Brian Coleman to agree with the FBU “for the first time in his life”. Coleman accused the FBU of only being interested in members’ jobs, which drew a sharp rebuke. Wrack said: “In terms of the loss of jobs, of course as a trade union we are concerned about the loss of jobs.” He added: “The real issue, however, is the service that is provided to the public because, no matter how good your computer system is, you need somebody to be able to answer the phone to an emergency call, so the loss of jobs impacts on the service



The spiralling costs of FiReControl

One of the key arguments against the FiReControl project has been its spiralling costs, taking money that could have been spent on firefighters. Matt Wrack put the point to the select committee: “We have a number of empty buildings which are of no current use to the fire and rescue service costing the taxpayer £40,000 a day. That is more than it costs to employ a firefighter for a year and that is a gross waste of public money.”

Shona Dunn, representing the Department for Communities and Local Government, estimated that the monthly lease costs just for the buildings will rise to just over £1 million a month once the ninth regional control centre is completed.

Fire minister Shahid Malik put the overall cost at £240 million – well below previous admissions but still twice the original estimates.

Witnesses at the hearings. Brian Coleman no longer represents the LGA



that is provided to the public. That is the very real issue.”

Wrack pointed out that the uncertainty around FiReControl has meant that large numbers of control staff have retired and not been replaced, or been replaced by staff on short-term contracts. He argued that it was precisely the loss of local knowledge that connected the loss of control staff with the quality of service for the public. Wrack said: “People have mentioned floods. What made the fire service work during the floods is the staff working in those fire controls and when you constantly undermine their morale that does ultimately put the public at risk.”

FBU ‘deliberately excluded’

One of the biggest revelations from the select committee hearings was the deliberate exclusion of the FBU from the FiReControl project, despite an acknowledgement that stakeholder involvement is vital for any improvement to the service and an admission that the FBU has been right all along.

Wrack: “In terms of stakeholder engagement there has been very little direct opportunity for stakeholders to question and discuss the technical issues.”

Bonney (Chief Fire Officers Association president): “We have a number of solution establishment workshops, as they are called, which bring



stakeholders together, but they are not particularly well organised.”

Wrack: “And they do not involve all stakeholders.”

Bonney: “They do not involve all stakeholders, that is true.”

Chair: “Which stakeholders are not included?”

Bonney: “It tends to involve professional people involved in the project at the moment from fire and rescue services. It does not necessarily involve, as Matt quite rightly says, all stakeholders. It does not include the representative bodies.”

Chair: “Which bodies, just to be clear?”

Bonney: “The FBU.”

Coleman: “Deliberately.”

Coleman went on: “There has always been that agenda and you can see why the DCLG wanted to keep the FBU, for example, well away from the process.”

Later in the hearings, fire minister Shahid Malik admitted that: “We ought to have engaged key stakeholders in a way that was adequate. It was inadequate.”

Breakdown service

The FBU has argued from the beginning that FiReControl was conceived by bureaucrats in offices away from the fire and rescue service, who imagined that mobilising an emergency service was similar to calling for a mechanic when the car breaks down.

Matt Wrack told the hearings: “One of the difficulties we have is people thinking that they are developing a project which is something like running an automobile assistance

service. I called the AA a week ago. An AA mechanic turned out and he or she can do the job themselves. It is completely different from running an emergency incident where you have large numbers of members of staff, large numbers of decisions, risks to members of the public, to firefighters, to the environment, all of these decisions; that is the importance of command and control.”

He added: “A key to regional control is the attendance of fire service officers. The mobilisation of fire service officers is, again, an afterthought in the regional control project. It is staggering to people who work within the service that some of these issues have been neglected right at the start.”

Government admits failings

Shahid Malik stated at the select committee

Tories admit their cuts agenda

Brian Coleman, the London Conservative councillor, represented the Local Government Association (LGA) at the FiReControl hearings. He admitted that the LGA had changed “to a position of hostility and against the project in principle”.

Coleman also let slip that a future Tory government would consider merging control with neighbouring fire authorities – regionalisation by the back door. The threat extended to fire authorities in general. He said: “We have 46 fire authorities in England and Wales at the last count. They are not all viable.”

James Pearson, a Conservative councillor in Manchester, also spoke at the hearings. He explicitly linked the FiReControl project to the wider “modernisation” (cuts) agenda pursued in Greater Manchester. He said: “Most of us expected that we would not be running control centres by now, so as part of the overall wider modernisation agenda, we have taken beds out, we have looked at reducing crews, overtime, we have gone through wholesale reviews on how we provide fire safety, we have looked at our borough command structure and taken out 30 per cent of the officer corps. These are all things that the current financial situation requires us to do.”



Matt Wrack,
FBU general
secretary



Shahid Malik
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, CLG



Cllr James Pearson
Local Government Association

now having to be retrofitted to take account of disability requirements, which is quite staggering.” Similarly the project seems to have forgotten the large number of retained firefighters in the UK. Wrack said: “Current controls take account of the mobilisation of retained firefighters to their retained stations. That needs to take account of whether those retained firefighters, for example, are available. Some of them are on and off availability, depending on their other commitments.”

A key indicator of the project’s gaps is the profiteering vultures circling for potential pickings. The FBU has seen advertisements to fire and rescue services from firms saying regional controls are coming, here are the issues that are not being addressed, and offering to “fill the gap” for a price. Wrack said: “Commercial organisations who are identifying the gap between fire controls and what fire services actually need are thinking, ‘We can make some money out of filling this gap.’” He added: “To me that demonstrates very clearly there is a huge gap at the heart of this project in how it was conceived in the very first place.”

Solutions

The FBU is not simply a critic – the union also has a plan for the way forward. Wrack said the union opposed “the government making some cavalier decision about scrapping FiReControl and not addressing the issue it attempted to discuss”. Instead he argued that “the project itself needs to be fundamentally reassessed”. He said: “We think regionalisation of fire controls is a mistake. We think that there are alternatives around the idea of upgrading and networking existing fire and

‘One of the fundamental problems with FiReControl from the start was that control staff views have largely been ignored’

hearings that: “The truth is that this did not start off too well. That is on the table. It is a fact.” He added: “The truth is that insufficient work had been done, detailed work with the fire and rescue community and with others to quite understand where we were going with this.”

Asked by Labour MP Clive Betts whether a contract was in place for the overrun of the project, the minister admitted that, despite talks with the firm EADS in July 2009, no contract had been signed. Only an “agreement” was in place to complete the work, or suffer penalties for further delays.

However the minister claimed that the project was back on track – something the FBU does not see. Wrack pointed out the contradiction between the government’s commitment to local, integrated risk-management plans by local fire and rescue services and its attempt to bolt a regional structure which bears no relation to the policy setting and operational planning within fire and rescue services. “That is the fundamental contradiction with FiReControl,” Wrack said.

The project still had shocking gaps which the government had overlooked. He highlighted the number of buildings that “are

rescue controls which would be a preferable solution to the regionalisation project”

MORE INFORMATION

The film of the hearing is on the BBC website

http://news.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/hi/house_of_commons/newsid_8500000/8500413.stm

An uncorrected transcript is on the parliament website

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/uc352-i/uc35202.htm