

SELECT COMMITTEE DAMNING OF FIRECONTROL PROJECT



House of Commons Select Committee raises major concerns about the regional controls project. The Union calls for an urgent meeting with ministers.

The FBU has called for an urgent meeting with ministers after a House of Commons Select Committee highlighted a number of major concerns. The key concerns centre on plans to close all 47 emergency fire control rooms in England and replace them with 9 regional centres.

The Select Committee for the Department of Communities and Local Government confirmed there were major risks with the plans which included facing a self-confessed high risk of "total project failure". The Committee said: "There are considerable risks associated with the project, identified in our evidence and in the ODPM's own business case. We consider the greatest of these to be the

opposition to the project from the FRS itself."

The current set up has worked very well for many years during every major incident. "The fact that the Buncefield incident was well-managed without RCCs suggests that the existing resilience arrangements are potentially effective," the Committee reported.

Unconvinced

The Select Committee was "unconvinced" the Government could give an assurance that current service quality could be maintained. Claims the project would save money - a key claim by Government - were also doubted.

The Select Committee said: "There is no evidence to suggest any

overall saving. As a result we, like many within the FRS, do not have full confidence in the Government's claim that FiReControl will achieve enhanced efficiency."

The Select Committee backed calls - from the FBU and others - for better incident level communications, a key lesson of both 9/11 and 7/7 which has never been acted on by Government.

Problems exposed

General Secretary Matt Wrack said: "The Committee has done the public a real service and exposed many of the problems to do with these plans. We now need an urgent meeting with the new team at the new Department to establish their intentions.

"This project is hanging by a thread and has little credibility within the fire service or elsewhere. Many of its key advocates are no longer in post and sensible decisions now have to be made if the fire service is going to unite and move forward."

Select committee conclusions on regional controls: key points

Further regionalisation?

Para 8/page 9: The FiReControl project also adds to a perception of a regional agenda.

Para 12/page 11: Some FRAs, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and others who submitted evidence are convinced that there are plans for further regionalisation of the FRS.

In support of this view, they variously cite the Government rhetoric that accompanied the 2003 White Paper, and recent moves to restructure the police and ambulance services on regional lines, as well as wider health service restructuring.

Many of the reasons for this opposition are specific to the current regionalisation of fire control rooms and are discussed below (see paragraph 45). The main objections are that: resources would be allocated at regional level, rather than county level as at present; and local knowledge would be lost, with a negative impact on local risk management and ultimately the ability of the FRS to respond to emergencies. We are looking at the Government's regional policy in a separate inquiry and will make recommendations in due course.

Para 13/page 12: Some, in particular the FBU, are not convinced by statements made by the ODPM. Given the apparent contradiction between recent statements from the ODPM, including those made in oral evidence to us, and the White Paper proposals carried forward through the creation of RMBs and the planned regionalisation of fire control rooms, this is understandable.

Para 14/page 12: Regional Management Boards, in the absence of the previously planned regional assemblies, are a confusing addition to the already complex governance and structural arrangements for the FRS. The FRS needs certainty over its future. The mixed messages from the ODPM on

regionalisation, and the lack of consistency between its policy and those of the Departments responsible for the other emergency services, are fertile ground for those fearful of a hidden agenda. Further regionalisation of the FRS should not take place without full consultation with the relevant stakeholders and clear justification for its aims.

Funding

Para 15/page 12: While this additional, short-term funding was not disputed in our evidence, there was some concern that FRAs would have to meet additional, long-term costs arising from new fire prevention and resilience duties and the move to regional control centres (RCCs). There were also some concerns about changes in the way that FRAs are allocating resources in connection with Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs), as increased spending on fire prevention has reduced the money available for other things, most notably, recruitment. We discuss this in Chapter 5 below. We recommend that the Government fund fully from central resources any additional burdens on FRAs imposed as a result of the modernisation agenda which cannot be met through greater efficiency and other savings.

Opposition to FiReControl

Para 20/page 15: Two other issues are also having an effect on FRS attitudes towards the project: a lack of information, and the perception that this is part of an agenda of further regionalisation.

Existing resilience

Para 21/page 15: [Re Buncefield] In fact, this incident was coordinated by an Interim National Coordination Centre, which quickly mobilised high volume pumping. The fact that the Buncefield incident was well-managed without RCCs suggests that the existing resilience arrangements are potentially effective. We recommend that the Government clarify the future role of the Interim National Coordination Centre, in particular in relation to RCCs.

Loss of local knowledge

Para 24/page 16: The President of the FBU highlighted how important local knowledge had been in the organisation of the response to the Buncefield Oil Depot fire, particularly as the initial emergency call did not link the explosion to the oil depot. The Bain Review stressed the importance of local knowledge and Cornwall County Fire Brigade highlighted "the importance of the role Fire Control staff play in assisting, managing and resolving incidents where their local knowledge is a key influence".

This has been supported by evidence from other emergency services. **The Association of Chief Police Officers, for instance, stressed the benefits of local knowledge:**

"It is also important to emphasise that, wherever possible, 'local knowledge' must be maintained within any migration to regional call centre systems. Failure to do so is likely to

impact on the effectiveness of the Fire and Rescue Service to provide an informed and "intelligence led" response to emergencies". The FBU stated that the move to RCCs would be detrimental as local services were core to the operations of a locally accountable fire and rescue service.

Para 25/page 17: We agree that FireControl may help callers to identify the location of an incident. Nevertheless, FRSs should take steps to ensure that their operational capacity is not compromised by any loss of local knowledge.

Impact on frontline services

Para 28/ page 18: Some witnesses were concerned that the creation of RCCs would have an adverse affect on service delivery and response times.

We are unconvinced that the Government can offer the assurance of maintained or improved service quality resulting from the FiReControl project and there is clearly widespread doubt across the FRS. If it can, we recommend it does so, and provides the evidence, immediately.

Location of RCCs

Para 29/page 18: The Fire Minister has stated that "in the post-September 11 world our emergency control centres need to be resilient against attack or natural disaster". The FBU stated:

"We are not convinced that the location of many of the proposed controls are as resilient as claimed. Controls which are based in a mixture of retail and business parks, in some cases close to childcare nurseries or major retail outlets, some on known flood plains (while asserting they will deal with major flooding) and some very close to airports (post 9/11) do not, in our view, constitute an improvement in resilience. The proposed locations have the hallmarks of being chosen for cheapness and ease of gaining planning consent rather than the truly resilient locations they are claimed to be".

Other evidence raised similar concerns about the proposed location of RCCs. We recommend that the Government ensure that the location of each RCC meets strict criteria on resilience.

'Out of scope' duties

para 31/page 20: The FBU suggested a lack of forethought and understanding of control room functions on the part of the ODPM, citing a questionnaire circulated recently by ODPM officials - after the ODPM had announced the sites of the proposed new regional controls-seeking to find out what work current fire control centres actually do.

The FBU also highlighted a letter from South East RMB to the ODPM of 9th May 2005. In the letter the RMB stated: "Many of these key activities must be maintained to ensure operational viability and yet have not been considered as

part of any reliable cost comparison...What is not yet clear is the scope of work to be undertaken by the RCC, and what will be residual i.e. what will remain for Fire & Rescue Authorities to continue to undertake".

Para 32/page 20: We asked the ODPM for clarification on what duties were defined as out of scope, and what the cost implications were of conducting these duties outside of control rooms. The ODPM gave two examples of 'out of scope' activities: "handling out of hours calls relating to social services or other council departments, e.g. for abandoned vehicles", and "renewing library books". It further stated that:

"Our initial analysis of the information provided by the FRS indicates that there is scope for modernisation of FRS business processes and consequent efficiency savings. When the analysis is complete we will be in a position to revisit cost assumptions in the business case, clarify the business processes for the new control arrangements, and help FRAs plan transition to new delivery arrangements".

Para 33/page 20: We are disappointed that the Government is unable to provide fuller details of duties that have been defined as out of scope. Removing some operations from control rooms should clearly result in savings in control room costs, but it is not clear where these operations will be transferred to, nor how the costs of the transfer and future operations will be met. **There is no evidence to suggest any overall**

saving. As a result we, like many within the FRS, do not have full confidence in the Government's claim that FiReControl will achieve enhanced efficiency. We recommend that the Government complete its analysis of control room functions immediately and certainly before making further progress with the FiReControl project.

Technology

Para 35/page 21: While the FRS welcomes the new technology that FiReControl will bring, many of those who submitted evidence raised concerns about failures in the technology, particularly during the transition period. Cornwall County Fire Brigade was worried about dependence on "untried and untested" technology. West Sussex FRA stated "a linked configuration of nine identical systems introduces the possibility of total national computer failure, which in the current set-up of 47 varied and unconnected systems is small". A number of examples were cited:

"it is well known from major events such as the major BT Southampton Exchange failure, fires involving other BT exchange causing national connectivity problems, and connectivity problems with networks resulting from 7 July, that communications infrastructure will and does fail at the optimum time for its usage".

Para 36/page 21: A number of witnesses were concerned about the risk of costs for IT projects spiralling out of control - as has been the case with some government-led IT projects in the past. Indeed, the Government's outline

business case itself identified a risk of total project failure. **Although the ODPM claimed that this was a general project risk, the FBU have provided us with an extract from the outline business case showing risks identified that specifically related to the FiReControl project.**

The outline business case states that: "there is one risk category above the risk threshold which indicates that immediate action and particular care must be taken in managing the risk: Governance and management capacity (A): the recent history of delivering IT/change projects in the public sector has demonstrated a less than 50% success rate. There is therefore a risk of unsuccessful delivery of the infrastructure and change components of regional controls, which could result in delay or even total project failure".

Para 37/page 22: We recommend that the 'end to end' testing of the technology include assessments of the likelihood of total systems failure nationwide. We further recommend that a resilient disaster recovery plan which addresses systems failure should be put in place.

Funding

Para 39/page 22: We agree that it is difficult for FRAs to have certainty regarding the financial implications of the move to Regional Control Centres without a full business case which includes information on what costs will be borne by whom over what timescale. We recommend that Government

provide a full breakdown of the costs implicit in the FiReControl project and identify which of these will be met by central Government and which it expects local authorities and FRSs to meet. Any cost over-run should be met by central Government.

Absence of full information about FiReControl

Para 43/page 24: Much of the opposition to FiReControl within the FRS stems from the absence of clear information. A key criticism is the lack of a fully developed business case.

Para 44/page 25: **However, withholding detailed information from stakeholders is at odds with gaining stakeholder support for, and input into, the project. Indeed the OCG's 'Manager's Checklist', a project management best-practice document, sets out key questions to be considered in developing the business case, including "do we have internal/external authority and stakeholder support for the project?" and "have the critical success factors and benefits been agreed with key stakeholders?".**

In the case of FiReControl the answer to these questions is no.

The Government should provide the FRS with all the non-commercial information of the latest full business case for FiReControl immediately. Information on the full business case should follow as soon as possible consistent with commercial considerations. This will ensure that the final decision is informed by the knowledge of those expected to operate within

the new structure and help to build confidence in the new arrangements.

Prospect of further regionalisation

Para 45/page 25: The opposition to FiReControl is also based, in part, on a fear of further regionalisation and a view that service delivery would be affected by the regionalisation of fire control centres.

The FBU have highlighted the fact that the Bain Review did not propose re-organisation along the lines of FiReControl. Bain concluded that greater collaboration should be pursued within the existing organisational structure but stressed that those fire authorities which maintained separate control rooms should demonstrate their cost effectiveness to the Audit Commission.

Alternative models

Para 49/page 27: We consider that achieving a common location for command controls for the three emergency services would facilitate greater collaboration in responding to incidents. It is disappointing that the Government has missed the opportunity to further increase resilience through co-location of control rooms as part of the FiReControl project.

FRS unconvinced

Para 50/page 27 The fact that the FRS has not been given enough information about the detail,

particularly the financial detail, of FiReControl, is at the heart of the opposition to the project. **The absence of information means that fire authorities and representative bodies cannot give unqualified support as they are unconvinced that the aims of enhanced resilience and efficiency will be achieved. There are considerable risks associated with the project, identified in our evidence and in the ODPM's own business case. We consider the greatest of these to be the opposition to the project from the FRS itself.**

For FiReControl to have any hope of success, the Government should obtain greater support from the FRS. This can only be achieved through provision of greater information on both the project specifics and long-term plans for the structure of the FRS. The Government should also better communicate to the FRS that the FiReControl project is based on the findings of past reviews of the FRS, notably the 2003 Mott MacDonald Report.

For more on our campaign against regional controls visit:
www.fbu.org.uk/campaigns/outofcontrol

Herts closures should be reconsidered in light of Select Committee report

Hertfordshire fire crews are pressing councillors to reconsider plans to close Bovingdon and Radlett stations in the light of comments and recommendations in a House of Commons Select Committee report published on 12 July. The

report highlights concerns over the impact local fire service cuts can have on regional and national preparedness to deal with major incidents including terrorist attacks which require a fire service response.

The Select Committee report reads: "We have noted that there is room to improve links between IRMPs and major incident planning...the FBU have pointed out that Hertfordshire, where Buncefield lies, has an IRMP which prescribes staff cuts in the county with the result that 'two of the retained stations who attended in the first 20 minutes of that incident are going to be closed and disappear'. This underlines the importance of local IRMPs [local safety plans] being linked to major incident planning." *Paragraph 78 on page 42*

Central fault line in current national resilience planning

"The FBU was concerned that FRAs' ability to initiate staff cuts as part of the IRMP process created a 'central fault line in current national resilience planning', as personnel levels impacted on the FRS's overall capacity to respond to a series of protracted major incidents.

"If IRMPs were well-integrated with wider resilience planning, issues such as overall FRS staffing levels would be more likely to be adequately considered. We recommend that the Government give urgent consideration as to how the Integrated Risk Management Plans may be better linked to planning

for major catastrophic incidents." (*Paragraph 74 on page 40*)

Can't just cut, close and hope

Tony Smith, Vice Chair for the FBU in Hertfordshire said: "The point the Select Committee is making - and it refers to Bovingdon and Radlett - is that we can't just cut, close and hope. Decisions to cut fire services here and elsewhere can diminish our overall ability to respond to the major incidents, including major acts of terrorism, we are told we will have to deal with.

"In today's world these are no longer theoretical issues but ones we have to equip, train and prepare for. The Select Committee means we need to ensure we have enough personnel to enable us to assist in major emergencies elsewhere and not only those in our own county. Firefighters from all over the UK came to assist at Buncefield. There may be a time when significant numbers of Herts fire crews have to go elsewhere, perhaps for several weeks, to assist another community.

"County councillors would need to reconsider these closures whether these comments were made or not. They now have an obligation to the public of Hertfordshire to do so and also - as this report makes clear - an obligation to others."

Emergency Workers Bill set to become law this autumn

MPs gave the final ok to the Emergency Workers (Obstruction)

Bill after its third reading in the House of Commons on Friday.

The Private Members' Bill seeks to make it a specific offence to obstruct or hinder emergency workers such as firefighters. Tabled by Alan Williams, Labour MP for Swansea West, and backed by the FBU, it will now go to the Lords and should become law in the autumn.

Alan Williams' private members' bill - a rare example of this type of bill that has been successful - enjoys cross party backing.

Union's policies aired in parliamentary debate

During the debate in the House of Commons the extent of physical attacks on firefighters and the problems this was causing for public service workers responding to emergencies and the public was debated in some detail.

The Union's policies on attacks and its research on the matter were also quoted extensively.

A number of MPs also raised issues related to violence against emergency workers that were not tackled in the Bill and many concurred with the FBU's calls for action in these areas too. A home office minister promised that the Government would consider them and report back to parliament.

Those risking lives to save others shouldn't be obstructed

Alan Williams said:

"The Bill addresses the offence of impeding emergency workers. It is based on two straightforward, simple principles. First, people who risk their lives to save others should not be obstructed, and should be free to undertake their rescue work without obstruction and attack by jobs and idiots. Secondly, people who need to be rescued in an emergency because they are in danger should not face additional danger because of the mindless activity of a minority of idiots."

Sanctions not enough - education training and understanding

At the conclusion of the debate Mr Williams added:

"First, it has emerged that hon. Members are deeply afraid that with increasing attacks on emergency workers, as well as interference in their work, we may end up with no-go areas in parts of some towns. Secondly, hon. Members are deeply conscious that sanctions alone are not enough, and that education, training and understanding must form part of the programme."

Lyn Brown, the Labour MP for West Ham said:

"The Bill puts in statute a respect for emergency services and emergency service workers that may not hitherto have been established. I believe that it will incrementally change opinion and the perception of those workers."

Citing to MPs some of the issues raised by the FBU, she said that she understood arrangements for

reporting attacks had been "tightened and improved" so data should henceforth "reflect better the situation as a whole" and that the Bill may underline the importance of data collection on attacks since it will be clear to firefighters something may be done about it.

National evaluation of local initiatives needed

Ms Brown added: "The [Fire Brigades] union also wants co-ordination and evaluation. I understand that various initiatives are being introduced throughout the country, including community-based projects with offenders and possible offenders. I know that we would all agree that there is a need for such initiatives to be properly monitored and evaluated nationally so that brigades can learn more quickly what works and what does not. Frankly, what works in one area will not necessarily work in another."

Ms Brown also said that "we cannot view one Bill as a panacea for all ills. We need to look at the provision of youth services and what happens in our schools, to build a picture of the sorts of remedies that can begin to impact on this growing social ill."

...and a national education campaign

"From the magnitude and frequency of the incidents, it would appear that some sort of national education campaign, co-ordinated with the emergency services, is

required to change people's attitudes to such behaviour.

Speaking on behalf of the Government the Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety, Tony McNulty said:

"...impeding, obstructing or doing something worse to prevent our emergency workers from going about their business... [is] simply not right in any way, shape or form. Whether it is just a kick-out at authority, or whatever the excuse is, or not, it must desist, and we must introduce legislation that addresses the issues—and the Bill is a necessary part of that."

"the Bill seeks to fill a serious gap...We need to fill the gap and add a deterrent or exhortatory value to the law."

Government to report back to parliament on further measures

"...we have to go a long way back along the chain and consider issues such as parenting, family breakdown and other factors that are the antecedents of antisocial behaviour, to try to address such matters. That is part of the Government's comprehensive approach."

"...we have heard some horrendous stories this morning about the ways in which people seek to impede and obstruct emergency workers. Some of the points that colleagues have made are entirely fair and were dealt with in Committee. Some have been answered, but some perhaps will need to be revisited."

"Hon. Members on both sides of the House have discussed the wider issues, and we will examine those points and report back to the House."

The Union and its parliamentary support group worked closely with Mr Williams in building support for the Bill. For more about the Union's campaign against attacks on firefighters - launched in April 2005 - visit www.fbu.org.uk/campaigns/attacks/

Cleveland vote 3:1 to strike over frontline cuts

Cleveland fire crews have voted three to one in favour of strike action over a cuts package they say will compromise firefighter and public safety. The cuts will hit those stations which were first to respond to the recent major emergency at the Terra Nitrogen plant in Billingham.

The action is in protest at proposals which include cuts at night, fewer rescue appliances, fewer firefighters on fire engines and a longer wait for crews to arrive to 999 calls. Fire stations will be downgraded, 66 frontline firefighter posts will be lost and specialist rescue equipment and fire engines will be axed.

Under the plans, Stranton fire station in Hartlepool will lose 24 firefighters and have an appliance removed from immediate operational availability. Stockton will lose a specialist rescue vehicle and 12 firefighters. Thornaby and Redcar will lose a total of 16 firefighters, eight at each

station. Middlesbrough Marine fire station will be closed 24.00-12.00. The union is trying to reverse cuts already pushed through at Billingham station.

Cleveland FBU branch secretary Steve Watson said: "Local fire crews have shown the strength of feeling against these cuts and there is a clear mandate for strike action. We are pleased the fire authority has now started to talk to us and we will not be announcing strike dates at this stage.

Protecting fire service in the long-term to save lives

"But local fire crews are making clear we have not held a strike ballot just to get a seat at a negotiating table. If these talks do not produce acceptable proposals we will announce strike dates. Cleveland fire crews do not want to take strike action. We want to protect the 999 service in the long-term to save lives and we are prepared to take periods of strike action to do that.

"Old fashioned cuts will result in the loss of 66 frontline firefighters and harm our ability to respond to emergencies across the county, not only in those areas where the cuts are planned. There would be fewer frontline firefighters arriving more slowly at 999 incidents with less rescue equipment available.

"These cuts mean fire crews could be left at 999 incidents with the choice of standing back and doing nothing until the necessary resources arrive and risking the public, or ignoring basic safety

procedures and risking ourselves. That will clearly compromise our safety and public safety."

Herts fire crews formally agree deal to end strike

There were mixed emotions when Herts fire crews met Monday night to formally end their industrial action over cuts and closures to the County's fire service. The deal struck with the county council will see the reversal of many of the cuts although councillors remain determined to close Bovingdon and Radlett fire stations.

The deal includes a new written assurance of no more cuts to frontline fire crews, frontline fire appliances or fire station closures for at least three years. A new recruitment drive to employ 39 new firefighters is now underway to redress frontline staffing shortfalls across the county.

The existing 999 response cover at both Watford and Royston will be maintained and cuts at those stations will not now go ahead. Four frontline posts at Hemel Hempstead, Watford and St Albans, 12 in total, will be redeployed to focus on preventative work while remaining available to crew fire engines when necessary.

Mixed emotions

Tony Smith, Vice Chair of Herts FBU said: "There are mixed emotions because although our strike action managed to reverse or change the majority of the council's original

proposals, we did not succeed in changing all of them. They remain hell-bent on closing Radlett and Bovingdon.

"Herts fire crews took strike action to protect this vital public service in the long term and we have partially succeeded in that aim. It was never a course of action we wanted to take but there was little choice open to us.

"That action was justified because we halted some of the cuts in their tracks and will ensure proper staffing levels in the future. But by calling off our current strike action we are in no way endorsing the closures of Radlett and Bovingdon.

Utter folly

"It is utter folly to be talking about cutting back on your first response emergency service when we are facing real risks from terrorism and climate change. The plan this is all based on was drawn up three years ago and the world has moved on. The original plans came before Buncefield, before the suicide bombings and before the fatal incident at Harrow Court, Stevenage.

"Herts fire crews will be the first response to any major terrorist incident and we are currently at a heightened state of alert. In addition this entire region is at a heightened state of alert because hot weather has created tinderbox conditions and a very high fire risk.

"Councillors really need to re-think the closures of Radlett and Bovington before it returns to haunt them. Now without strike action to distract them we hope they take the opportunity to think again.

Firefighter unions unite across Europe

The FBU hosted last week the first meeting of unions representing firefighters across Europe. Over a day and half union reps from 12 countries from east and west of the Continent debated pensions, working time and a range of other challenges they are facing.

The European Federation of Public Services Unions (EPSU) - the umbrella Brussels-based organisation that helped co-ordinate and finance the meeting - gave briefings on influencing European policy on matters relating to fire and how chief fire officers are working together at a European level to advance their agenda.

The meeting, chaired by President Ruth Winters and attended by General Secretary Matt Wrack along with other Head Office officials, agreed to draft a European firefighters' "charter" that would outline common policy positions and objectives. The 'EPSU firefighters' network', which was established earlier this year, also decided to meet again in the Spring.

For more info on the Union's international work visit www.fbu.org.uk/campaigns/international/

Palestine: hundreds killed since July 6 Israeli invasion

A hundred Palestinians have been killed since the beginning of the Israeli invasion of Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip on July 6 2006, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

Hundreds of Palestinians, including 170 children have been injured and 375 Palestinians treated for shock during this period. Three Palestinians were killed and another 11 injured on Sunday morning during the recurring Israeli invasions of Beit Hanoun. One of those injured on Sunday morning was Amal Jamal Abu Ourah who is seven months pregnant. She is showing signs of miscarrying her baby and is currently being hospitalized.

Visit www.palestinecampaign.org to do something about the humanitarian crisis in Palestine. Also, write to your MP. Visit www.fbu.org.uk and follow the Lobby Your MP link or click on link below:
www.fbu.org.uk/aboutus/political/epetition.php

Get the e-bulletin and other FBU campaign news by email. Visit www.fbu.org.uk, type in you email address in the bottom left hand side of the homepage and "Sign Up". It takes less than 2 minutes.