

**CABINET**

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| <b>Report Title:</b>                          | Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme - Fire and Rescue Authorities Financial Information and Sign-Off                                       |
| <b>Meeting Date:</b>                          | 22 March 2016   |
| <b>Lead Councillor(s):</b>                    | Councillor Matthew Hicks, Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection  |
| <b>Local Councillor(s):</b>                   | All Councillors   |
| <b>Director:</b>                              | Mark Hardingham, Chief Fire Officer   |
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**Brief Summary of Report**

1. The Chief Fire Officer and Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection have received the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP) Financial Information and Sign-Off Pack from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).
2. The Pack provides details about the introduction of the Emergency Services Network (ESN), the new national communication system which is being developed to replace the current Airwave system, used by the emergency services.
3. The documentation has been developed by DCLG and the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) for fire and rescue authorities and it contains financial information regarding the future communications network. The purpose of the documentation is to provide fire and rescue authorities with the information required by them to make an informed decision about engagement with the ESMCP and intent to use the ESN.

**What is the Cabinet being asked to decide?**

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. To direct the Chief Fire Officer to sign and return the formal documentation (attached at Appendix A), on behalf of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Authority, agreeing to participate in the ESMCP.</li> </ol> |
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## **Reasons for recommendation**

5. ESMCP is a cross-government programme with the objective of replacing the existing mobile communications service provided by Airwave to the 3 main emergency services and other public safety agencies.
6. The strategic drivers for change are:
  - a. The current contract between the Government and Airwave expires, in a phased manner, from 2016 through to 2020. As such, the Airwave system is not likely to be available for use from 2020 and the Government has already let contracts for the development and operation of an alternative system called the ESN.
  - b. Operation of the Airwave system is reported, by the Government, to be significantly more expensive than similar public safety communication systems across Europe, and cost reduction and value for money, amongst other important factors, are significant considerations for them.
  - c. Emergency services are increasingly requiring the use of data for mobile communications, in addition to voice communications, to support operational effectiveness and transformation. The Airwave arrangements enable limited data use but cannot fully, without significant investment, meet these future requirements.
7. The move to the ESN from the Airwave system will mean that significant transition costs will be incurred by fire and rescue authorities. In addition, the costs associated with the future use of a new communications systems will change from those seen presently. The Government has committed to providing funding to support the move to the new system but first, by 25 March 2016, DCLG require a formal commitment from each fire and rescue authority indicating its intent to take up the new service when this becomes available.

## **What are the key issues to consider?**

8. An Equality Impact Assessment may be required before the new ESN is implemented and Officers will consider this within the local programme of work. However, the implementation of the new communications system is not expected to have a negative impact on the wider community.
9. Whilst involvement in the ESMCP is not being mandated by Government, it is being strongly recommended by them and The Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA).
10. There are currently no viable, realistic alternatives to the ESN that meet the resilience, interoperability, time and cost-benefit parameters within which fire and rescue services operate. Therefore, the options are limited.
11. The ESN is likely to represent significant future advantages for emergency services. These would, it is believed, significantly outweigh any alternative arrangements, which would need to be developed, commissioned, maintained and funded locally and without Government support.

12. Involvement in the ESMCP presents Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, along with other emergency services in Suffolk, and nationally, an opportunity to:
  - a. Access improved data based communications services, under the umbrella of a national Government contract;
  - b. Provide resilient national and local communications network coverage;
  - c. Be able to work smarter and more flexibly using the latest communications technology and associated hardware;
  - d. Keep costs as low as practicable by using a national communications network, as opposed to developing alternative local arrangements, and
  - e. Access the improved communications system functionality and capabilities with scope to facilitate and support transformation and create local benefits.
13. A national programme team, based in the Home Office, lead and support the ESMCP.
14. Fire and rescue services have been involved in the programme from the outset and this has enabled the fire sector, represented by CFOA, to be assured of the operational requirements and provide assurance that these can be met by the programme. By considering such feedback, DCLG has agreed the national business case for the ESN, as far as the fire and rescue service in England is concerned. They are now seeking sign-off by fire and rescue authorities.

#### **What are the resource and risk implications?**

15. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Authority has a statutory duty to secure the services and equipment necessary to efficiently meet all normal requirements and to make arrangements for dealing with calls for help and for summoning personnel. These duties are contained within the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. The use of an effective communications system is essential for meeting these obligations.
16. The Act also requires the Secretary of State to publish a Fire and Rescue National Framework for England. This places a duty on the Authority to collaborate to ensure interoperability at emergencies. The establishment of the ESN supports this requirement.
17. The main financial implications associated with the ESN are identified within the attached report. It is envisaged that use of the ESN will, according to DCLG estimates, lead to annual operating savings of between £18,369 (2018-19) and £113,079 (2031-32) for Suffolk Fire and Rescue Authority. However, officers continue to seek further clarity on the financial arrangements from DCLG and the Home Office to be able to provide greater local assurance over both annual operating costs and the associated savings, taking into account the grant funding currently provided.
18. Significant transition costs will be incurred as emergency services move from one communications system to another. However, the Government has committed to support these costs, making £50.4m available for the 46 fire and rescue authorities in England. Grant payment will be made on an annual basis to a lead

Service in each region, to cover these costs, which include the establishment of local project management roles, vehicle fit-out costs and support to cover training etc. Services across the east of England are working in collaboration to support transition and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, as part of this, has been asked to recruit a project manager in 2015-16, to assist with transition planning and preparedness across the region and locally.

19. The ESMCP timetable has slipped previously and, given the amount of enabling work required by suppliers before the new system is ready, officers consider it prudent to expect and plan for further delays. Despite the programme being led and managed nationally, local contingency plans will be developed to ensure that any risks to the Authority, relating to the programme, are identified, reported and any necessary actions considered.
20. Future operational risks such as the potential for inadequate network coverage, particularly relevant for rural areas such as Suffolk, where 4G coverage and broadband are not currently widely available, will be reported to the national programme team. Local transition decisions will only be authorised by the Chief Fire Officer once effective coverage is in place and assured and after the financial arrangements, including those relating to future grant funding, have been clarified and agreed.

#### **What are the timescales associated with this decision?**

21. The ESMCP is due to begin implementation nationally in 2017. Transition for fire and rescue services in the eastern region is expected to take 12-months, commencing February 2018.
22. Subject to the decision taken by Cabinet, Suffolk's transition date should be confirmed in the spring of 2016.
23. The DCLG expect Authority sign-off before 25 March 2016.

#### **Alternative options**

24. Whilst the Government is not formally mandating the use of the ESN by emergency services, it has strongly recommended that authority's sign-off and commit to future use of the new system. This guidance is also reinforced by CFOA.
25. There are currently no realistically viable alternatives to the ESN.

#### **Who will be affected by this decision?**

26. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service operational personnel, other emergency responders, Suffolk Resilience Forum, related partners and Suffolk's communities.

## Main body of report

### Background

27. In 2007 Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, together with all other fire and rescue services in the UK, moved from their locally provided radio communication systems onto the national Airwave radio system, which was already being used by Police forces across the UK.
28. The Airwave system provided, for the first time, a resilient and national voice communications system for the fire and rescue service which facilitated interoperability between the emergency services and provided limited data communications.
29. To date, the Airwave system has performed very well, with over 99% coverage across Suffolk and high levels of reliability. Users have confidence in the system and its use.
30. The Airwave service was brought into use, for the fire and rescue service, under the auspices of the national Firelink Programme, led by DCLG. A contract for the service was established between Airwave and the Government, with individual access agreements being established for each Fire and Rescue Authority.
31. The annual cost of Airwave to authorities are, in general, higher than those previously incurred for the operation of the previous local communications arrangements. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's previous communications system cost approximately £100,000 per annum to operate prior to 2007. To recognise the new financial burden of Airwave the Government has been funding each authority to offset the additional operating costs, which vary nationally. In 2015-16 Suffolk Fire and Rescue Authority received grant funding of £223,655 for the use of Airwave. The actual cost of use was £332,624. This left £108,969 to be found from within Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's revenue budget, for which provision has been made.
32. Part of the grant received (£36,000 per annum) supports the operation and replacement of Mobile Data Terminals (MDT) on fire engines, which were provided as part of the national FiReControl Programme as part of the communications equipment needed. This element of the grant funding will be removed from December 2016 because the Government's support for this equipment will come to an end. Arrangements are currently being made to replace the MDTs on both Suffolk and Cambridgeshire fire engines, as part of a joint collaboration, and to establish the necessary support for these. The cost for MDTs, and similar operational equipment, will not be covered under the ESMCP and local provision is, instead, being made to fund this equipment.
33. The contract between Airwave and DCLG expires in 2016. However, plans have been made to extend this by 3 years to 2019. Scope also exists to further extend the contract on a month-by-month basis from 2019 through to 2010, where required. Alternative communications arrangements must have been established by the Government prior to contract end.
34. Additionally, the frequency spectrum used by Airwave will not be available for use by the emergency services from 2021. Therefore, an alternative frequency band and new communications system must be established in advance.

35. There is a growing demand from emergency services for the use of mobile data to support emergency response activities and for improved linkages between front-line hardware and back-office and other IT and general information systems. The Airwave system, whilst providing a limited data capability within the contract, does not currently meet all of the future requirements, without significant investment and likely increased operating costs.

### **The Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP) and Emergency Services Network (ESN)**

36. The Government believes that the ESMCP provides the best solution for updating and enhancing the emergency services current mobile communications arrangements. The programme is led by the Home Office on behalf of other Government departments.

37. DCLG, until recently, provided the national policy direction for the fire and rescue service and had previously led the ESMCP from the fire and rescue service policy perspective. However, on 5 January ministerial responsibility for fire and rescue policy transferred to the Home Office.

38. The intended scope of the ESMCP includes all 44 police forces, 50 fire and rescue services, including those in Scotland and Wales, and 13 Ambulance Trusts. A range of other civil public safety organisations will also be permitted to access the ESN as second tier users. Overall, this means that the new system is likely to have approximately 300,000 users across the UK.

39. Locally, the programme will involve replacing Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's current mobile operational radio equipment, provided to help firefighters communicate, on all front-line emergency vehicles and the equipment provided in the 999 Combined Fire Control, which is operated in partnership with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire and Rescue Authority. Training will also be provided to allow all users to operate the new equipment. It is likely that there will also be significant changes to ways of working and opportunities for the improvement of services.

40. The costs provided by DCLG to date, for the fire and rescue service use of the ESN, indicate that future use should produce savings, when compared to the current Airwave system costs. These are estimated at £80m through to 2032 for the fire and rescue service nationally.

41. The ESN is said to allow the emergency services to realise further efficiencies through the use of new communications technologies, with compatible hardware, to better reflect local needs and requirements. This could, it is reported, create significant advantages and opportunities.

42. DCLG and CFOA have stated that the new system will be more versatile and flexible in nature than the Airwave system, whilst still providing effective interoperability and resilience.

#### **Sources of Further Information**

Appendix A -ESMCP – Fire and Rescue Authorities Financial Information and Sign Off Pack



Suffolk - ESMCP Sign  
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