



Control choice

In the wake of the failed FireControl project, **David Watts** looks at the choices facing fire and rescue authorities, with individual user requirements a key to success

THE TERMINATION of the much-criticised FireControl project – announced by the Government at the end of December – has thrown the future of fire and rescue service control rooms into chaos.

Breaking the news, Fire Minister, Bob Neill MP, said the Government and the project's main contractor had agreed that the initiative – which was intended to replace England's 46 standalone fire control rooms with a national network of nine state-of-the-art regional control centres – could not be delivered to an acceptable timeframe.

Since calling a halt to the project, the Government has announced a consultation process with the fire and rescue service on the way ahead (*see p.28*). With many of the planned regional control centres built or under

construction, the consultation will seek feedback on the best use of FireControl assets. There are no immediate implications for public safety arising from the decision to cancel FiReControl, but the Government is keen to press ahead quickly. It has asked for comments on its consultation document by April, with decisions expected to be made quickly after that.

The consultation is an excellent opportunity for fire and rescue services to lobby for an approach to control assets that they want in the context of the three themes of resilience, enhanced technology and efficiency.

However, in the short term, there is a high degree of uncertainty and, for some fire and rescue services, decisions need to be made now because they cannot afford a further delay of four or five months. There will clearly be

only limited central funding, and many decisions will, in any case, need to be taken at a local level.

The choices

The problem for many fire services is that they have held off the modernisation of their control rooms on the understanding that FireControl, when completed, would deliver new purpose-built regional centres and a new national integrated system.

There are now three main choices facing fire and rescue services:

- upgrade existing control rooms and/or systems – which may require significant investment
- consolidation, mergers or co-location – this might be with neighbouring fire and rescue services, or with other emergency services, such as police or



It is important to consider individual user requirements during any control room upgrades or merging of facilities

ambulance, to make more effective use of existing buildings and systems

- 'life stretch' – making the existing facilities last longer in the hope that the economic circumstances will improve, or that regionalisation will reappear in a future project

There is a real opportunity for change – change for the better. However, whichever route is taken, the key to success is to fully understand the individual user requirements, to ensure that the systems deliver effectively. Putting people – the users – at the centre of control room design will deliver efficiency, effectiveness and operational benefits.

Functional design

New control centres are likely to involve the re-use of existing buildings, rather than new build or the expansion of existing rooms. Some fire and rescue services have let their existing rooms dilapidate, or have had to vacate their current premises in anticipation of moving to the planned new centres.

Where existing buildings are re-used, the focus on investment will be to ensure that the right working environment is created to make them fit for purpose – providing a safe,

efficient and comfortable environment. Almost invariably, the adaptation of existing structures brings constraints, and designers will need to work around these. For example, the rooms being proposed may not be the ideal shape to facilitate the right functional links between work positions; or the location of the control room may present problems with wider circulation around the building. Good design decisions must be made to adapt existing facilities to provide an ergonomic workspace.

Socio-technical issues

Perhaps the main challenge will come where the fire and rescue services merge or decide to co-locate their control rooms with those of their neighbours or other agencies. These projects will have to carefully consider the design of the enlarged control room and the systems that will be used.

What is usually forgotten, or inadequately addressed, is the management of the change that will occur. All control room design projects involve change, but the need to address the socio-technical issues is higher when organisations come together. The key is to involve the workforce in the change – without this, the chances of

getting buy-in and commitment to the change is low, and resistance will increase the risk of project failure.

Where projects involve the integration or co-location of operations, one of the major challenges is to assess the impact on how things get done, and the fundamental operational philosophy. This needs to be followed through into areas such as team working, changes in processes and procedures, in management and supervision, and issues like the retention of local staff knowledge. Organisations are different, so developing a new common way of working is often hard – as FireControl discovered – but with the right input, it can be done.

FireControl assets

There is also the question of what will become of the now-built regional control centres? In the first instance, they are most likely to be offered on a first refusal basis to the fire and rescue services – this is the indication in the Government's consultation paper.

However, there are a number of other options that the Government may consider – for example, tri-services controls for an area, selling off the buildings for use as control centres by other agencies, such as utilities or rail, or perhaps a more significant change of use, such as call centres, data centres or laboratory space.

The built assets are modern, resilient, well-designed buildings (FireControl was scrapped due to technology issues, rather than problems with the centres themselves), which could equally well serve as control centres in any new schemes. The advantage here is that there will need to be fewer compromises and potentially greater cost savings, as these benefit from the latest thinking in user-centred design.

Life stretch

In some cases, the only realistic approach will be to continue to use the existing facilities and systems. This does not mean making no changes at all, but is likely to entail stretching the life expectancy of the existing control rooms. This 'life stretch' approach will minimise obsolescence, reduce the risk

of operator error, and ensure the facility can cope with increasing demands or changes in the external world.

The starting point is an audit which identifies where the control facilities have weaknesses and where potential risks lie. From the audit findings, clear decisions can be made to prioritise where investment is required to optimise the facilities to cope with both current and short-term needs. In some instances, savings can be made. While 'life stretch' does not offer a long-term approach, it does effectively deal with immediate and short-term issues, enabling a longer-term strategy to be developed.

System integration

One final aspect is the need for integrating systems. Cost constraints may dictate against this, but failure to integrate can jeopardise operational effectiveness: FireControl is only the latest example of high-profile problems with IT projects in the emergency

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services. Older control rooms often mix legacy systems with new technology, new ways of working with the old. However, this can create many problems for the operator and for the effectiveness of the control room itself.

To optimise the control function, projects need to aim to integrate separate systems into a simplified and consistent front-end interface; the key being understanding the task and presenting the information that is required when it is required. This approach brings a number of benefits to the operator: effectiveness, fewer errors, potentially reduced hardware, smaller desks and lower space requirements for the control room – and therefore lower project cost.

There are many options on the table and the key, as highlighted by the consultation document, will be how the desired improvements are to be funded. The Government's localism agenda will drive the power to decide what is done to the local level, but individual fire and rescue services may be on their own when it comes to determining affordability and how to get the best enhancement for the best value ■

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