



Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority

Decision Report

Report reference number: 026-24

Government security classification: Official

Title of report: Renewal of the ECFRS Firelink Contract

Area of county / stakeholders affected: ECFRS Control and Operations

Report by: Adolfo Guerra, ICT Category Manager

Date of report: 30th July 2024

Enquiries to: Karl Edwards, Director of Corporate Services

1. Purpose of the report

The purpose of the report is to seek approval for the renewal of the Firelink contract and payment of the service fees for the financial year 2024-25.

2. Recommendations

This report makes and provides supporting information for the following recommendations:

- That the purchase order for the renewal of the Firelink contract and payment of the service fees for the financial year 2024-25, to the value of **£1,060,286.28** is approved by the PFCC.
- That the PFCC provides authorisation for the Chief Financial Officer to raise this purchase order on their behalf.
- That the PFCC notes that we have received confirmation from the Home Office of the value of the Annual S31 Firelink Grant for 2024-25. This is placed at £293,381.20 which is based on the amount included within the 2024-25 budget.

3. Benefits of the proposal

The benefits of the proposal are that it will allow ECFRS to continue to discharge its statutory duties, by continuing to mobilise and support mission critical voice and data communications between Control, appliances, officers and all other emergency services over the current Airwave network.

4. Background and proposal

The Firelink Project Agreement - to provide a new digital emergency services communication network - was originally commissioned and approved by what was then the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in 2006. The project implemented the Airwave network and service, which was borne out of the need for all emergency services in Great Britain to have access to a secure and reliable communications network with unrivalled coverage across the length and breadth of the country.

The original contract ran until the end of December 2016. DCLG then approved a major extension of the Firelink Project Agreement for a further 36 months until the end of 2019, but this was further extended by the Home Office in 2018, due to delays in the Home Office led Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP), which was commissioned to replace the Airwave network with a new 4G LTE Emergency Services Network (ESN). As a result, the core Firelink contract between the Home Office and Airwave remained in place and unchanged, with a revised target date at that point for the national shutdown of the Airwave network of 31 December 2022.

The Full Business Case (FBC) for ESMCP was then reviewed and updated by the Home Office in 2020, at which point the best case for the Airwave network shutdown was estimated to be June 2023, although the expected (risk based) shutdown date was estimated to be as late as June 2025.

The ESMCP has been further delayed over the last year and is now subject to a full re-procurement exercise by the Home Office. On that basis, there is currently no definitive date as to when ECFRS will be able to complete the transition to the new ESN, so the proposal is that we continue to renew the Firelink contract on an annual basis until the point at which we can fully transition to the new ESN and decommission all Airwave devices and connectivity to the Airwave network. The costs of service will continue to be allocated to us by the Home Office.

5. Alternative options considered and rejected

There are no alternative options to the Airwave network until the full ESN mission critical voice and data capability has been delivered by ESMCP. As stated above, there is currently no definitive date as to when ECFRS will be able to complete the transition.

The only alternative open to the Commissioner is to withdraw from the Airwave service without there being a workable alternative. This would have significant negative operational implications and is not recommended.

6. Strategic priorities

Renewal of the current Firelink contract will support the following aspects of the Fire and Rescue Plan:

- **Prevention, protection and response**
 - Help all of our communities, both urban and rural, to stay safe
 - Ensure an effective, co-ordinated response to major emergencies and incidents
- **Improve safety on our roads**
 - Minimise the impact of road collisions by ensuring an efficient response to protect property and preserve life

- **Develop and broaden the roles and range of activities undertaken by the Service**
 - Improve performance by using technology better to coordinate our response with other emergency services
- **Collaborate with our partners**
 - Enable effective national and international mobilisation
- **Make best use of our resources**
 - Benchmark our performance with other fire and rescue services and leading public and private sector bodies to improve our own performance
 - Use new technology and business processes to improve service efficiency

The proposal also aligns with the following national fire and rescue priorities set by the Home Office:

- Make appropriate provision for fire prevention and protection activities and response to fire and rescue related incidents
- Collaborate with emergency services and other local and national partners to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service they provide

7. Operational implications

Renewal of the Firelink contract will have no operational implications. However, as set out in section 5 above, not renewing the contract would effectively withdraw ECFRS from the Airwave service without there being a workable alternative. This would have significant negative operational implications and is therefore not recommended.

8. Financial implications

The current Firelink contract is subsidised by the Home Office for all fire and rescue services.

The following table denotes the annual Firelink costs along with the annual S31 Grant received since 2016-17. Both the costs and the annual S31 grant are budgeted for each financial year.

Financial Year	Actual Firelink Costs	Annual S31 Firelink Grant	Net Cost to the Authority
2016-17	£772,334	(£569,608)	£202,726
2017-18	£790,970	(£590,193)	£200,777
2018-19	£812,236	(£609,480)	£202,756
2019-20	£837,259	(£628,258)	£209,001
2020-21	£822,815	(£642,268)	£180,547
2021-22	£827,304	(£567,920)	£259,384
2022-23	£907,342	(£488,968)	£418,374
2023-24	£1,016,573	(£366,726)	£649,847
2024-25	£1,060,286	(£293,381)	£766,905

The Annual S31 Annual Firelink Grant for 2024-25 is £293,381. This amount is the amount included within the 2024-25 budget.

9. Legal implications

Renewal of the Firelink contract will have no legal implications.

10. Staffing implications

Renewal of the Firelink contract will have no staffing implications.

11. Equality and Diversity implications

We have considered whether individuals with protected characteristics will be disadvantaged as

a consequence of the actions being taken. Due regard has also been given to whether there is impact on each of the following protected groups as defined within the Equality Act 2010:

Race	No	Religion or belief	No
Sex	No	Gender reassignment	No
Age	No	Pregnancy & maternity	No
Disability	No	Marriage and Civil Partnership	No
Sexual orientation	No		

The Core Code of Ethics Fire Standard has been fully considered and incorporated into the proposals outlined in this paper.

12. Risks

There are no known risks of renewing the Firelink contract.

The risk of not proceeding with the Firelink contract is that, as an emergency service, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service would not have the ability to mobilise resources to 999 calls or communicate during the management of an operational incident. Firelink is a system developed by Airwave Solutions and is a private digital network specifically for use by the emergency services. There are no other providers of this network, and it would therefore not be possible to provide the resilience of communications during emergency events. This is nationally recognised through the Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Programme (JESIP).

13. Governance Boards

This proposal was agreed in principle through the Strategic Board on 13 June 2024.

14. Background papers

There are no background papers to support this report.

Decision Process (026-24)

Step 1A - Chief Fire Officer Comments

(The Chief Fire Officer is asked in their capacity as the Head of Paid Service to comment on the proposal.)

I support this recommendation



Signed

Date 30/7/24

Step 1B – Consultation with representative bodies

No consultation is required to be undertaken with the representative bodies

Step 2 - Statutory Officer Review

The report will be reviewed by the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority's ("the Commissioner's") Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer prior to review and sign off by the Commissioner or their Deputy.



Monitoring Officer

Sign:

Print: P. Brent-Isherwood

Date: 30 July 2024



Chief Finance Officer

Sign:

Print: Neil Cross

Date: 30/7/2024

Step 3 - Publication

Is the report for publication? YES

If 'NO', please give reasons for non-publication (Where relevant, cite the security classification of the document(s). State 'none' if applicable)

None

If the report is not for publication, the Monitoring Officer will decide if and how the public can be informed of the decision.

Step 4 - Redaction

If the report is for publication, is redaction required:

- 1 Of Decision Sheet NO
- 2 Of Appendix N/A

If 'YES', please provide details of required redaction:

N/A

Date redaction carried out:

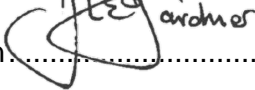
If redaction is required, the Chief Finance Officer or the Monitoring Officer are to sign off that redaction has been completed.

Sign: Print:

Date signed:

Step 5 - Decision by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner or Deputy Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

I agree the recommendations to this report:

Sign:  (DPFCC)

Print: Jane.Gardner..... Date signed: 02/08/2024

I do not agree the recommendations to this report:

Sign: (PFCC / DPFCC)

Print: Date signed: