

THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION

£20 MILLION CONSULTANCY FEES AND TWO YEARS' WORK IN WHITEHALL LEAVES £1 BILLION FIRE SERVICE TECHNOLOGY PLAN WORSE OFF

A controversial Government fire service technology plan described two years ago as having a “high risk” of “total project failure” is now facing even greater risks. After two years of intensive central Government work, and £20 million paid to project consultants, the risks associated with the FireControl project have increased significantly.

The plan, drawn up by John Prescott, involves closing all 46 emergency fire service control centres in England and replacing them with a national network of 9 regional centres at a cost in excess of £1 billion. The 46 existing control centres are based in each fire brigade and are the command and control centres which have responded to every terrorist and other major incidents ever handled by the fire service.

The project is one of the most controversial and technically difficult IT projects ever attempted by central Government. It is widely acknowledged central Government has a poor track record of delivering large IT projects on time, on budget and which work as originally intended.

The project's draft Full Business Case was quietly released late on Friday 27 October and claimed “some risks have been removed or significantly reduced”. An intensive union analysis of the plan shows the number and scale of the risks have significantly increased when compared to those identified in the previous Outline Business Case produced in November 2004.

The Outline Business Case from November 2004 had “one risk category above the risk threshold” and in the “red” and three other areas of risk “close to the risk threshold”. The one area of risk in the “red” resulted in the conclusion there was a “high” likelihood of unsuccessful delivery which could result in “delay or even total project failure”.

The very serious risks identified with the project resulted in plans being put in place in November 2004 aimed at reducing the risks. After considerable work and expense since then, including £20 million paid to project consultants, the risks increased substantially.

The latest draft Full Business Case accepts there are now THREE significant areas of risk above the “risk threshold” and in the “red” and now four risk categories “close to the threshold”. All three are described as having a “very high” likelihood of happening with a “high impact” if they do.

All involve serious doubts being placed on whether the plans will work, how much they will cost and the impact of delays in decision making. The plans are already 3 years behind their original schedule and that is likely to increase, as are the costs.

Key areas of risk identified in the Draft Final Business Case include: “Strategic Change/Impacts (B)”. Now judged “very high” likelihood of happening/”high” impact if it does and placed in the “red”. This highlights the opposition of staff across the entire fire service to the plans. Many skilled and experienced control staff have already left in

disgust at the plans and many are making it clear they will not move to the new controls. A recent Select Committee report also described opposition and huge scepticism across all levels of the fire service, including employers and fire authorities.

“Critical dependencies (C)”. Now judged as a “very high” likelihood of happening/ “high” impact if it does and placed in the “red”. This involves the delays and costs which will arise if the fire control plans are not perfectly aligned with the introduction of the new FireLink digital radio system.

“Financial resources (D)”. Now judged as “very high” likelihood of happening/ “high” impact if it does and placed in the “red”. This includes increases in the “project costs” and when and if any financial benefits will arise. That is, will the project result in savings or greater costs and, with the risk category it is placed in, it is not a reference to making savings (or it would not be a risk). The November 2004 outline business case explicitly referred to how problems in this risk area might “impact on Council Tax” and also result in reduced “resources available” to the fire service.

“FRS and brigade resources (F)”. Remains judged as a “very high” likelihood of happening/ “High impact” if it does and remains unmoved in the “amber”. This is a reference to the enormous burdens being placed on fire authorities and whether they are able to cope with the huge and complex demands being placed on them. There is a very high likelihood they cannot and this would have a high impact.

“Governance and management capacity (A)”. This risk area is now judged as having a “very high” likelihood of happening rather than having only a “high” likelihood of happening. Reduced from having a “high” impact to having a “medium” impact. In the November 2004 business case this risk area warned of the poor record of Government success with IT/changed projects. This is no longer explicitly mentioned but it warns that key dates “are unlikely to be met for the first wave regions.”

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack said: “This plan rips apart a fire service control and control system which has never failed to replace it with one which may never work. The lives of the public and firefighters are clearly being put at risk.

“The Government claims they have removed risks or significantly reduced them. The truth is a project described in 2004 as having a high risk of total project failure now faces greater risk and greater threat of failure.

“It is pure Whitehall farce to set out to reduce risks but instead waste millions of pounds of public money that ends up increasing the risks of an already shaky project. Instead of looking for much cheaper, better and lower risk ways of addressing concerns, Government is still backing one of John Prescott’s favourite regional projects.

“The consequences of any failure will be catastrophic. And Government will be looking for both cuts in frontline services and increases in council tax to pay for any overspend.

“John Prescott has gone and the new team of ministers and civil servants need to be brave and reassess where they are going with this. On any test it has all the hallmarks of the next IT

disaster waiting to happen and ministers need to think again before they waste more time and money on it.”

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