

ESMCP Implications

The current Airwave tetra-based radio solution is a very reliable and effective means of communication for the emergency services and other agencies, albeit, it is expensive and is only really suitable for voice communications and limited data transmission. The technology and standards required to deliver a fully functional replacement for Airwave, that can meet current and future data transmission requirements, does not yet exist. Ideally, the introduction of ESMCP should run alongside Airwave until it has been demonstrated that the replacement is fit for purpose. It is not clear if Government are willing to give a commitment to continue supporting Airwave beyond current contractual obligations. Should DCLG not extend the Airwave contracts, it may be left to individual FRS's to negotiate separate contracts with Airwave or source alternative solutions.

There will be a code of connection for ESN, the code of connection ensures our network has the necessary security features to enable our data network to be joined to the ESN. To connect the two Networks the Public Sector Network (PSN) will be used. To pass the code of connection, therefore, MFRS must achieve PSN compliance and be accredited by the Home Office.

In November 2015, Merseyside FRS accepted a proposal from CFOA to work as the pilot FRS in gaining PSN compliance and accreditation in readiness for the NW region transition.

This should fall in line with other codes of connection with which we already comply with i.e. Airwave, Indications are that the ESMCP project team is trying to use lessons learnt from past projects such as FireLink and FiReControl and the communication so far would suggest that we will get a practical and suitable solution. However, the procurement and commencement of rollout by 2016 is a major challenge.

The capacity of a commercial network, particularly if an incident occurred during a large event, is a concern and part of the ESMCP requirement is to be able to segregate and prioritise the network to reduce congestion issues for the emergency services. This represents a major challenge for the industry and question marks still exist over the technological solution for this and the commercial viability. Although there is currently a facility in place to prioritise emergency service mobile devices on commercial networks, it does not provide the necessary resilience and exclusivity necessary to carry a dedicated emergency services function.

The Airwave service under the Firelink contract for FRS's is a managed service but potentially ESN will not be. The Authority will have to ensure they have the resources to be able to manage the service themselves. There may be scope for ESN to be managed as a national service, either by CFOA or by the formation of a dedicated central team.

The Airwave network currently has 97.8% geographical coverage of mainland UK. Mobile networks currently provide 95% coverage of the population which means large rural areas do not have any coverage. This has implications for Emergency Services that cover scarcely populated areas. It may not be commercially viable for network coverage in remote areas and alternative technology may need to be developed. It is not yet clear who will bear the additional cost of this in areas where demand will be very low. The current Airwave network is a national contract and in effect, the cost of remote coverage is subsumed (and therefore subsidised) by the more urban populated areas. If the concept of "user pays" is adopted the final solution may be unaffordable in some areas. MFRS have submitted information on areas within the county where network coverage may be problematic.

Consideration must be given to the possibility of installing ESN equipment prior to cutover which would mean placing new equipment next to existing in appliances, server rooms, etc. This could prove to be a challenge as it is not yet known what this equipment will be.