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Dear Clive

**Communities and Local Government Committee Report on FiReControl
(Fifth Report of Session 2009–10, HC352)**

As agreed, I am writing in response to the Committee's Report on the FiReControl project and to update the Committee on the Department's current activities in relation to fire and rescue control services in England.

On 20 December 2010 the Fire Minister Bob Neill MP announced to Parliament that we had terminated the contract with the main IT contractor EADS Defence and Security (now trading as Cassidian) by mutual agreement and decided to close down the FiReControl project. The reason was that EADS Defence and Security could not meet the requirements of the project within an acceptable timeframe.

In its Report of 1 April 2010 the Committee recommended (paragraph 101) that **"CLG should press ahead with the FiReControl project"** but made this conditional on the Department addressing the concerns raised in the Report and said: **"In particular, it is conditional on the urgent agreement of a viable project plan, in which the main stakeholders can have confidence, which will ensure that the target 'go-live' date of mid-2011 will be met."**

Mindful of this recommendation, in June 2010, following his initial review of the project, the Fire Minister made it absolutely clear to the main contractor EADS Defence and Security that FiReControl must now be delivered to time, cost and quality. The Department activated key milestones in the contract with EADS to ensure the mid-2011 delivery date – the date that EADS's representative had assured the Committee in oral evidence that it could meet (Q76, Ev13 in the Report: "We are committed to delivering this by mid-2011"). The activation of the milestones had the effect of setting a timetable for various key activities to be finished prior to the completion of the system in three control centres by mid-2011. The Department shared this timetable with the fire and rescue services as we were not able to secure a viable project plan from EADS.

However, by September, I had no alternative but to report to the Committee that we had seen little sign of improvement in EADS's delivery record and we had serious concerns about their ability to deliver on time. As you are aware we took various contractual steps to

rectify the situation and ensure timely delivery but, following discussion with EADS, we reached agreement on terminating the contract as they were unable to meet the requirements within acceptable timescales and further delay was the only other option.

On 13 January 2011 the Department published a three-month consultation on the future of fire and rescue control services in England. In launching the consultation, Fire Minister Bob Neill MP made it clear that we would not be imposing any solution on fire and rescue authorities. Decisions on the future of control services would be for individual fire and rescue authorities to make. However the Government remains committed to supporting fire and rescue authorities in improving their control services so they can continue to fulfil effectively their statutory duty to respond to emergency calls and mobilise resources to incidents. The extent of additional support will depend to a large extent on their choices over Firelink and the control centre buildings, as discussed in more detail below.

The consultation puts forward four possible scenarios for the future arrangement of control services, based on a model of increasing decentralisation. The Government's preferred scenario is for fire and rescue authorities to look for greater collaboration and sharing of control services, with support from central government. This should, combined with fire and rescue authorities' upgrades and improvements during the lifetime of the project, achieve many of the original aims of the project but would be built on a basis of localism and decisions made by the fire and rescue community.

The consultation document covers a range of issues on which we are seeking views, including:

- The lessons learnt from the FiReControl project
- Whether the original aims of the project – improving efficiency, resilience and the technology available to fire and rescue services – are still valid and how these might be achieved in the future
- The best use of legacy assets from the FiReControl project
- The priorities for any funding available
- The future role of central government.

At the same time, my officials are discussing the future of the control centre buildings with fire and rescue authorities around the country. The Department holds long-term leases for these and we will continue to pay rent and maintenance charges. Our preference would be for fire and rescue services to make use of the purpose-built centres and benefit from the investment made. We have reached agreement in principle with the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority for the London Fire Brigade to move their current control room service and other functions to the new control centre at Merton. A number of other authorities have expressed an interest elsewhere, and in addition there is interest from potential users outside the fire and rescue community, either with their own control functions or requiring secure premises.

The other legacy issue with a potential cost to the taxpayer is the interface with Firelink – the digital national radio network delivered to all fire and rescue services in England, Scotland and Wales. All 46 standalone control rooms in England have at least an interim interface for basic voice services and the system is working effectively. Through FiReControl this interface would have been enhanced to provide advanced voice and data services. There is clearly a significant cost difference between installing this interface in nine centres compared to 46 separate control rooms. This is another issue on which we have invited views in the consultation.

We envisage providing this enhanced Firelink interface for all fire and rescue services as a minimum in improving control service technology. However, if fire and rescue services choose to share control services there would be savings as there would be if some fire and rescue services were to make use of the buildings and we could share costs with them. In either case, or in a combination, there would be more funding available to support fire and rescue service priorities that might include control room technology upgrades, replacement of ageing legacy systems and accommodation issues. We will listen carefully to views from the sector on these choices.

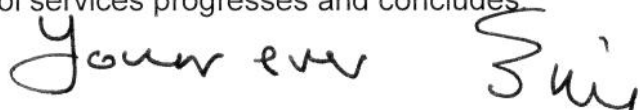
In addition to the discussions about the control centres, my officials are holding meetings with key partners in the fire and rescue community to explain the consultation proposals and gauge their priorities and plans for achieving efficiencies, enhancing resilience and addressing their own control room issues. We are also committed to taking up any invitations to attend local and national events in order to take discussions further. We are very grateful for the high level of co-operation amongst the fire and rescue community that we have experienced so far on this. From discussions held so far, the early consensus emerging is that plans being developed by fire and rescue services following the termination of FiReControl, together with upgrades already made, will largely deliver the original aims of the project.

The Department is also ensuring that the benefits of other legacy assets from the project can be realised by the fire and rescue services. We are, for example, making arrangements for future maintenance of equipment already delivered to some fire and rescue services, including the mobilising kit in local fire stations and on-board computers in fire appliance. Various data sets have been compiled – for example, of fire hydrants, place names, major roads and phone boxes – and these will be both distributed to each fire and rescue service as well as lodged where fire and rescue services can have future access to them. Work done with many operational fire and rescue professionals on harmonising ways of working across fire and rescue services will similarly be made available across the fire and rescue service.

We have asked for responses to the consultation by 8 April 2011 and by this point, through our engagement work, we intend to have a good picture of the different views and approaches in the sector to help us review the formal responses. We will publish a summary of responses and Ministers intend to make any decisions necessary shortly after the consultation period concludes. The consultation document is available on the Department's website at: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/fireandrescuecontrolservices.

I hope you can see that we have taken on board many of the points made in the Committee's Report in conducting this consultation and drawing up the approaches within it. I have commented in more detail on the specific recommendations in the Committee's Report in the Annex to this letter.

I would like to finish by taking this opportunity of thanking you and the Committee for your work in scrutinising this project. We welcomed the Report as a sound basis for taking action when the Coalition Government was formed in May. We will continue to keep you and the Committee updated on developments as the consultation on the future of fire and rescue control services progresses and concludes.



THE RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP

“100. There are now considerable doubts about whether the project can be delivered. CLG needs to take this opportunity to consider carefully the points and concerns raised in this Report to review its options and make an informed, clear, open decision about the future of FiReControl.”

This has proved correct. The Department took the steps recommended to review in detail the state of the project and progress made. We required the main contractor EADS to demonstrate its ability to deliver to time in accordance with the contracted requirements. As a result we jointly concluded that the project could not be delivered within an acceptable timeframe. While much of this material remains commercially confidential, we have shared with you, as Chair of the Committee, the independent reviews you requested in the Report. Generally, the project has been conducted in as open and transparent a manner as possible during its last phase. All the costs associated with it, such as the control centre costs for example, are in the public domain.

“101. On balance, given the investment of public funds already committed, and the benefits that will accrue, we conclude that CLG should press ahead with the FiReControl project. However, this recommendation is conditional on the assumption that CLG addresses the significant concerns and issues raised in this Report relating to its project management and the relationship with its main contractor and with its stakeholders. In particular, it is conditional on the urgent agreement of a viable project plan, in which the main stakeholders can have confidence, which will ensure that the target 'go-live' date of mid-2011 will be met. This project plan must include interim milestones which will allow progress to be assessed on a regular basis and decisions to be taken about whether alternatives need to be considered.”

I have addressed the main points in paragraph 101 in the earlier part of this letter.

“102. CLG should also put in place a communications plan that aims to shift the negative perception of the project and to influence FRSSs to make the positive decision to switch to the system. Each FRA has the legal right to make the final decision on whether to accept FiReControl. CLG must respect that right and must work hard to unite all FRAs in supporting FiReControl. Any failure to ensure that all FRAs use the new system would be a significant blow to the ultimate aims of the project.”

As part of the governance structure, the project had a high level Stakeholder Advisory Group comprising representatives from the fire and rescue authorities, Chief Fire Officers Association, regional project delivery, the main contractor and national project team. While this Group endorsed the communications strategy and plan for the project, at the beginning of 2010 they gave a strong steer that, given the stage the project had reached, stakeholders and end users were looking for clear and concrete evidence of progress in delivery of the main IT system before they would be convinced.

With the Advisory Group's backing DCLG and EADS jointly showed a demonstration version of the the system with the Intergraph product at the Local Government Association's March conference. While not fully integrated end to end, the demonstration gave an accurate view of some key parts of the system at that point. This was well received among the representatives of the fire and rescue authorities and, had a more substantial demonstration over the following months been possible, no doubt this build up of confidence would have continued. However, with completion

of the system scheduled for less than a year ahead, our professional fire and rescue partners made the point emphatically that any further demonstration must now be based on the real system, as it would be delivered, to gain the desired confidence. This proved not to be possible.

An Assurance Board was established which reviewed objective evidence of achievement but unfortunately this only highlighted the continuing lack of progress.

“103. Meanwhile, CLG should urgently draw up and consult on contingency plans for any further failures. As a priority, those contingency plans should ensure ongoing safe and effective fire and rescue cover across the whole country whether or not FiReControl is implemented. They must also ensure that all regions involved will have adequate fire and safety measures in place during the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The plans should include provision for the maintenance and, where necessary, upgrading of existing control room technology, and CLG should meet the full costs of that to FRAs where it has become necessary as a result of delays in the FiReControl project.”

The main aim of the Department was to deliver the project to time, cost and quality. However, as is only sensible and recommended by both the Committee and the Chief Fire Officers Association, we worked on a ‘plan B’ contingency. This formed the basis of the scenarios set out in the consultation document that is now out for consideration. By working on this with the fire and rescue community, we were able to launch the consultation relatively quickly after the decision to close down the project. As you can see the Department acted on the Committee’s recommendation here.

The Committee’s recommendation also mentions fire and safety measures for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. I should emphasise that the FiReControl network was never part of the emergency planning arrangements in London’s bid for the Games. The Olympic village in London will operate as an independent unit with its own communications centre covering police, ambulance and fire and rescue resources within the village. The London control room will support the Olympic control unit as required, if additional resources are needed.

As I mentioned earlier, we are hoping the London Fire Brigade will be able to move into the new control centre at Merton and this will be in good time for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. My officials are working closely with the London team to achieve this. We have recently announced, as part of the provisional local government settlement, that both London and Dorset fire authorities will receive additional funding for their activities during the Olympic Games.

While London is hosting the majority of the events, I am well aware that other fire and rescue services have Olympic events in their areas. As in London, these services have enormous experience of managing major events every year – from major football fixtures to the Glastonbury Festival. We are confident that they have arrangements in hand. All fire and rescue authorities receive funding that enables them to upgrade and replace their systems as they become out of date so they can continue to fulfil their statutory duties of responding to emergency calls and mobilising resources to incidents. Fire and rescue authorities have continued to be funded throughout the lifetime of the FiReControl project and, indeed, many have replaced their control room systems during that period.

In the consultation we ask for views on the priorities for any available funding – funding technical enhancements to improve resilience as well as funding accommodation or control room infrastructure costs arising out of delays to FiReControl are options. We believe it is important to take into account fire and rescue service priorities before deciding on the allocation of any funding.

“104. We recommend that CLG inform our successors in the new Parliament in July 2010 that a viable project plan has been agreed with EADS, and report on progress against that plan, in particular the early version of the modified Intergraph product.”

These are points I have dealt with the call for a viable project plan and report against progress earlier in the letter. As regards the modified Intergraph product, I should point out that this product and the part system EADS were developing may be procurement choices for fire and rescue authorities if they decide that their control system needs replacing but, as I said at the beginning of this letter, this Government will not impose a solution on fire and rescue authorities. They have a wealth of procurement experience in this area and will base any decisions on their assessment of what is in the best interests of public safety for their communities and meets their statutory requirements.