



**Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority**

**Decision Report**

**Report reference number:** 030-23

**Government security classification:** Official

**Title of report:** Renewal of ECFRS Firelink Contract

**Area of county / stakeholders affected:** ECFRS Control and Operations

**Report by:** Paul Gardiner, Control Programme Manager

**Date of report:** 10<sup>th</sup> August 2023

**Enquiries to:** Neil Cross, Chief Financial Officer

**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 2023-24.

**2. Recommendations**

This report makes and provides supporting information in relation to the following recommendations:

- That the renewal of the Firelink contract and payment of the Service Fees for the financial year 2023-24, to the value of **£1,016,573** is approved by the PFCC.
- That the PFCC provides authorisation for the Chief Financial Officer to raise the associated purchase order on their behalf.
- That the PFCC notes that the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECFRS) has received confirmation from the Home Office of the value of the annual S31 Firelink Grant for 2023-24. This is placed at £366,726, which is the amount included within the 2023-24 budget.

### **3. Benefits of the proposal**

The benefit of the proposal is 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. This was further extended by the Home Office in 2018 due to the delays in 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 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. However, 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 option open to the Commissioner is therefore 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
- **National Fire and Rescue Priorities – 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
  - The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has deemed that the emergency services in the UK are in a service by a monopoly provider. It is expected to remain with Motorola (Airwave Solutions) in this position until 2029.

## 7. Operational implications

Renewal of the Firelink contract will have no operational implications.

## 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	(£489,000)	£418,342
<b>2023-24</b>	<b>£1,016,573</b>	<b>(£366,726)</b>	<b>£649,847</b>

The annual S31 Firelink grant for 2023-24 is £366,726. This amount is the amount included within the 2023-24 budget.

The Home Office has previously announced that the Firelink funding will be phased out over five years in equal fifths, with the last payment being in 2025-26.

In discussion with the Home Office in July 2023, the Chief Financial Officer and the Head of ICT explored options to reduce the annual cost and received clarification that there is no option to do this. The costs are non-negotiable, being determined by Airwave and passed to the Home Office who must apportion that across FRSs nationally. This is the matter being challenged by the CMA, which may result in a lower cost in future, or a rebate on previous years, but that all remains uncertain and without timescales.

**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 risks associated with the renewal of the Firelink contract.

**13. Governance Boards**

This proposal has not been discussed at any governance boards. The request is a direct result of the Firelink invoice being received for this financial year.

**14. Background papers**

There are no background papers to support this report.

**Decision Process (#)**

**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.)

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Sign:



Date: 11 August 2023

**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: 8 September 2023

Chief Finance Officer

Sign:



Print: Neil Cross

Date: 10 August 2023

**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 | <b>NO</b>  |
| 2 | Of Appendix       | <b>N/A</b> |

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 /do not agree the recommendations to this report:

Sign:  ..... (PFCC / DPFCC)

Print: Roger Hirst PFCC      Date signed: 22/09/2023