

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Emergency Services Network, HC 1006

Monday 27 March 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 March 2023.

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); James Cartlidge; Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Mr Jonathan Djanogly; Mr Louie French; Anne Marie Morris.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, Emma Willson, Director, National Audit Office, Adrian Jenner, Director of Parliamentary Relations, NAO, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

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Witnesses

[I](#): Sir Matthew Rycroft KCMG CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; David Kuenssberg, Director General of Corporate Delivery, Home Office; Dr John Black, Programme Director, Home Office; Simon Parr, Senior Responsible Owner for the Emergency Services Network, Home Office.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General
Progress with delivering the Emergency Services Network (HC
1170)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Matthew Rycroft, David Kuenssberg, Dr John Black and Simon Parr.

Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 27 March 2023. Today we are talking to the Home Office about the Emergency Services Network, which was meant to be a world-beating overhaul of the systems that our emergency services use to communicate.

When the 7/7 bombings happened in 2005, there were problems identified with the old Airwave system, which did not work in some circumstances. That was part of the reason for introducing the new system. To date, it has cost around £2 billion.

Since its inception, which this Committee has been looking at it for longer than all of their witnesses in front of us have been dealing with it—that gives you some idea of the timescale—the programme has been beset by delays, and it is still no closer to delivery. Today we have our witnesses here to find out what on earth is going on, whether our emergency services will ever see the benefits of the system and what the cost to the taxpayer will be.

I am also delighted to welcome James Cartlidge MP, the Exchequer Secretary, who is a former member of this Committee. He is a constitutional oddity. On one thing we align with the Treasury: both the Treasury and the Public Accounts Committee watch very closely, with our beady eyes, how taxpayers' money is spent. Mr Cartlidge, would you like to say a few words? I know you have a busy afternoon, but we very much welcome you and the fact that you embrace the work of this Committee. I will hand over to you, Mr Cartlidge.

James Cartlidge: Thank you. It is a great honour to be sitting on the Committee as the Exchequer Secretary for the first time, in a role you have called a constitutional oddity. We call it *ex officio*. I just wanted to make a few comments about our relationship.

The Public Accounts Committee has a long and proud tradition of challenging how all Government Departments and public bodies effectively and efficiently spend taxpayers' money. As Treasury Minister, I fully support the Committee on its critical scrutiny of public spending and performance. In addition, I also fully endorse the good work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office in assisting



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the Committee in their work.

Both the Treasury and the Committee share a common goal: ensuring that taxpayers' money is spent well, and that good-quality public service outcomes are achieved for the benefit of all our citizens. Looking at Treasury minutes, I am impressed that, on average, over 90% of the Committee's recommendations are accepted by Government. This shows the added value the Committee provides on behalf of taxpayers. More importantly, I can assure you that the Government shall always endeavour to deliver fully on the Committee's accepted recommendations on time.

I welcome the Committee's recent requirement that Departments should report as soon as possible on implementing those recommendations. In support of the Committee, I know Treasury officials will also continuously challenge Departments on progress and implementation. That is why the twice-yearly Treasury minutes progress report helpfully keeps Departments on their toes.

I also recognise the important work of the Committee's clerks and staff, who ensure the Committee's business is taken forward effectively. I know the Treasury Officer of Accounts team, as a central point of contact in Government, will continue to maintain this important working relationship. I also know the Treasury Officer of Accounts team and the Treasury work closely with all accounting officers and their senior officials across Government to ensure they are well prepared to assist the Committee helpfully and meaningfully at its evidence sessions.

Finally, as a Committee member, I will continue to monitor its work and recommendations and receive its reports, as well as endeavour to maintain the essential and long-standing relationship between the Treasury and the Committee. I commend you for all your important work. Clearly, your work today is extremely important. Thank you for having me this afternoon.

Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. I also want to put on record my thanks to David Fairbrother, as Treasury Officer of Accounts, heading up the team. We have been working very effectively together to ensure accounting officer assessments are produced in a timelier fashion. We will be doing some further work on that. I do not know whether the deputy Chair, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, would like to say a word or two.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We welcome the Exchequer Secretary here. Thank you very much for taking a close interest in our work. We are probably the most productive Committee. We produce about 100 reports every single year as a result of twice-weekly hearings. The workload and productivity of this Committee is enormous. We do not have a productivity gap on this Committee.

Thank you for recognising the fact that 90% of our recommendations are accepted. That means we are producing effective reports. When our



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recommendations are either accepted or, particularly, not accepted, we look very carefully at the reasons. We are quite happy to recall witnesses, if they do not accept our recommendations, to ask them why. Thank you very much for recognising the work of this Committee. We appreciate it hugely.

Q1 Chair: I am very aware that the Minister has pressing business in the Treasury. There is a lot of work after a Budget as well as before. I would like to thank you very much, Minister. I understand you need to leave, but we will be doing the work, as you have set out. Thank you very much.

Before we go into the main session, as we have Home Office witnesses in front of us, I wanted to ask some questions about Baroness Louise Casey's report.

I would like to welcome Sir Matthew Rycroft, who is the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office. Welcome back to you. I would also like to welcome Simon Parr, a first-time attendee at this Committee, the senior responsible owner for the Emergency Services Network at the Home Office; Dr John Black, the programme director for the Emergency Services Network at the Home Office; and David Kuenssberg, who is the director general of corporate delivery at the Home Office. We have three first-timers and a veteran collecting his air miles.

If I turn to you first, Sir Matthew, we had the devastating report of Baroness Casey last week. Three members of this Committee are London MPs, so some of it was not entirely surprising. We do not need to repeat what the Home Secretary said in the House last week, but there are two things I want to press on a bit further. Has there been any consideration since the report was introduced of breaking up the Metropolitan Police or reforming it in any way?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First of all, thank you very much for this opportunity. I am glad to say that the Home Office is one of the beneficiaries of the productivity of this Committee, as it seems as though we are pretty regularly here, quite rightly being held to account.

On the Louise Casey report, we were as distressed as others to read the detail in the report from so many witnesses and other victims of the various points she addressed. As the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Crime and Policing have all set out, the Government are determined to work with Sir Mark Rowley, the Commissioner of the Met, and the whole of the Met in response to her very clear recommendations.

Nobody in Government is going to rush towards the recommendation to break up the Met. There clearly are very significant benefits to having such a strong, large police force for our capital city. There is an ongoing question about some of the national capabilities the Met holds, such as for countering terrorism, but most observers would agree that this part of



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the Met is running effectively and the case for change is unmade. I am sure we will carry on looking at it, but I personally have not seen any overwhelming evidence to suggest that breaking off the counter-terrorism policing part of the Met would lead to any significant improvement, or to any significant uplift in the safety of our citizens.

Q2 Chair: Most people would agree that, when a change like this has to happen, moving all the deck chairs around might not be the easiest thing to do. From what you have said, it is not off the table. There are always discussions about whether the national responsibilities should be within the Met or in a different arena. That is a conversation that is always active in the Home Office.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a conversation that has been active throughout the time I have been in the Home Office. Dame Louise Casey's report has made it even more active. I would not anticipate a change imminently, but I am sure it will be a subject of ongoing scrutiny. As I say, in the Home Office we are open to going where the evidence leads us. That is what we will be looking at in terms of the safety of the citizens of our capital and our country.

Q3 Chair: The Home Secretary told the House last week that the vetting process is being reviewed by the College of Policing. Can you tell us what the timetable for that is and what discussions are going on about how that vetting could be made more consistent? We understand there are different vetting processes for different police forces up and down the country. I am talking about England here; I should be clear.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: This has been under significant scrutiny as part of the police uplift programme. It is the responsibility of each chief constable, working with their police and crime commissioner, to get vetting standards and processes right for their force. We have no intention of shifting that balance of responsibility.

We want to ensure that standards are sufficiently high across the board. That is one of the purposes of the College of Policing's work. This was under way previously and has been accelerated as a result of Louise Casey's report.

Q4 Chair: We recently looked at vetting across Government. Your own Department will be a major recipient of the vetting process. Vetting was centralised through the Cabinet Office and a separate vetting service was created, partly for consistency reasons. It is interesting that you are not taking the same approach, evidently, in the Home Office. Is there a particular reason for that? Is it because you are being led by the police, or is it just something that had not occurred to the Home Office to look at before?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, it was given a very significant amount of scrutiny when we set up the police uplift programme, which is about to come to an end.



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Q5 Chair: I mean aside from the uplift programme. It is not the uplift programme that has led to different vetting processes for different forces. That was already in place. I was just wondering why it has not been a consideration for the Home Office before. Indeed, it does not sound like it is now.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: What the standards are is a consideration. If there is any gap between what should be being provided and what is being provided, clearly we need to close that gap. If the way to close that gap is through greater centralisation, we will do that.

As I said in a previous context, we will follow the evidence. We will see what the College of Policing review says and we will make sure that we are acting on its conclusions.

Q6 Chair: One of the things we have seen with the central process is that, because it has been taking on more work, that has led to delays. We appreciate it cannot necessarily happen overnight, but were you aware, before Baroness Casey's report was published—you might have been—or before she did her work that there was this very big variance in how different police forces vet their officers?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, we were aware that different police forces dealt with the vetting requirements in different ways. We were also aware of the tragic results whenever a vetting process that should have prevented someone from joining a police force failed to do so. Clearly, that is something we have sought to act on whenever the evidence came to light.

Q7 Chair: It just seems odd that this was not flagged as a concern at all anywhere in the Home Office if, as you say, examples happened where there was a failure in vetting.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It has been clear all along that there have been failures of vetting. What is not clear is whether the answer to the failures of vetting is centralisation. If that is the answer, that is what we will do. There are other ways of closing that gap.

Q8 Chair: You are looking at a standardisation rather than a centralisation.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There should absolutely be a standardisation. There should absolutely be clear minimum standards that every force is beating.

Chair: We would agree with that.

Q9 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Good afternoon, Sir Matthew. I have two point. Without naming names—that would be invidious—some of the most heinous misdemeanours have come from quite senior officers, and there were several warnings before the crime occurred. Where in the system will the continuous assessment be improved, so that when there is a warning, that officer can be rooted out more quickly?



Sir Matthew Rycroft: There are many parts of the system to pick that up. There is the work of the College of Policing looking at all the standards. His Majesty's Inspectorate goes around, force by force, looking at all sorts of issues of performance, behaviour and other things. Within each force, it is the responsibility of the police chief, working closely with the crime and policing commissioner, to ensure that these sorts of problems are rooted out. There are lots of different stages at which we need the system to work in order to prevent this sort of thing from happening.

Q10 **Mr French:** Sir Matthew, you made some quite interesting comments there in response to the Chair on standards and vetting. One aspect that is perhaps confusing for the public is where responsibility lies for how this can be improved. I am a London MP, like the Chair. In your comments so far, you have not mentioned—I am not sure if it is deliberate—that relationship between the Home Office and the Mayor's office. Can you just explain, please, how policing standards can be improved in London?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, absolutely. In my previous answers, I talked a lot about police and crime commissioners. In London, the function of the police and crime commissioner is carried out by the Mayor of London and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. That is the role. That is where the primary accountability for the Met lies. The Home Office seeks to work closely with the Mayor and his office on all issues that relate to the Met.

Q11 **Mr French:** There is an announcement being made right now in the Chamber on anti-social behaviour, which I fully welcome. On the enforceability of the measures the Government are setting out today, how can we get through to some of these issues? In my area of Bexley, for example, we have an operational issue around the tri-borough policing model; we share police resources with two other London boroughs. Is this something I should be directing solely at the Mayor's office, or is it something the Home Office can help solve?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: On something like that, I do not know whether the Home Secretary has made the announcement yet; I do not want to pre-empt anything she might say.

Chair: She has, unless she is very slow. She has been on her feet for 19 minutes. We are getting a bit beyond Sir Matthew's territory here.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The main point I would make is that the primary channel for an issue like that for a London MP should be the Mayor's office. If there are issues of national concern or importance that go beyond the Met, the Home Office will also have a very strong interest.

Q12 **Chair:** Of course, the counter-terrorism element is a very big national interest.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.



Q13 Chair: We could spend all day discussing Baroness Casey's excellent but very hard-hitting and shocking report, but we will move on to another issue that is frankly quite shocking for this Committee, the Emergency Services Network. When we were preparing for this session, we reflected that at least three members of this Committee have been dealing with this issue longer than any of you as witnesses have. It is something we are very on top of and very concerned about. Sir Matthew, perhaps I will just give you a chance to apologise for the dismal lack of progress both since you were last here, and since this was first mooted back in 2012.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First of all, I should say I have now entered my fourth year in the Home Office as Permanent Secretary, so I have some continuity, and I take full responsibility for the progress that this programme and all of the other programmes in the Home Office portfolio have made in that time. There has been progress. You said at the very beginning that there had been no progress towards delivery, and that is not the case. There is an inevitability about the Emergency Services Network.

Q14 Chair: I am sorry, let me just be clear. There is an inevitability, because the old system is getting out of date, and it will eventually have to be switched off. Something has to replace it. We keep seeing no real progress in rolling the kit out to people on the ground. No force, ambulance service or fire service has taken it on yet. It is well behind the deadlines that were originally set. Money is being spent on something that is not being delivered. If you call that a success, you must live on a different planet from this Committee, Sir Matthew.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I have not called it a success, but I have called it progress. I have called it progress towards delivery. We are over halfway to having all of the technical delivery in place for the mass transition, which needs to happen before the Tetra technology, on which the Airwave system is based, becomes obsolete. We think the beginning of that phase will be on a 2030-to-2035 timescale.

We have had delays to this programme—I absolutely accept that—but we remain on track to turn off Airwave before 2030, which is when the risk would begin to increase if we were unable to do that. We are absolutely focused on ensuring that we are ready by 2030.

We have had a further delay as a result of a significant supplier, Motorola, choosing to leave the programme following the CMA conclusions, which I am sure we will talk further about in the session. I make no apology at all for the fact that the CMA's provisional ruling says that the British taxpayer is owed £1.1 billion. That is something I hope the PAC and the NAO are as pleased about as I was in the Home Office.

Chair: We still need to get that, and we still need to see a service delivered.

Q15 Anne Marie Morris: A lot has changed since 2015. The world and



technology are in very different places. In those days, we did not have WhatsApp or Telegram, but during Covid, where would we have been without WhatsApp? We find that Telegram has been absolutely crucial and fundamental for communication and data exchange in Ukraine.

Sir Matthew, are we overengineering this? Are there not commercial solutions—maybe those two—that we could use, rather than developing something bespoke, which not only takes time and money but which end users will also have to get used to and accept? Most of them will understand the sorts of provision the WhatsApp and indeed Telegram can provide.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: John might want to come in on the technical detail, but before that let me agree with your main point, which is that the technology has moved on a lot and so has this programme.

As you suggest, the programme will be as off-the-shelf as it can be, and will use standard commercial networks wherever possible, but we need to have a bespoke product for all our emergency services so that the brave men and women up and down the country, who are keeping our fellow citizens safe, have the best technology available. They also need to have the ability to talk to each other, literally at the press of a button, which would override normal users, such as you or me, if there were an emergency. That is not something that can be bought off the shelf. That is something that needs a very significant investment.

We have to move off the existing Airwave system because Tetra, the system it is based on, is becoming obsolete.

Chair: Yes, we are well versed in that.

Q16 **Anne Marie Morris:** Indeed we are, but the guts of it is going to be something that is a standard commercial product. We are just looking for the add-on, which is the push-to-talk functionality you are trying to describe. Surely what you are looking to buy must be simpler than what you were looking to buy way back in 2015.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: You are absolutely right: the market has moved on. At the beginning of its life, this programme was absolutely at the cutting edge of technology, which is not a comfortable place for Government to be. The Government are no longer at the cutting edge. We are doing exactly what other Governments around the world are doing. That is a sign we are on the right track here. Perhaps Dr Black could come in on the technology.

Dr Black: I believe there are a couple of features of what we are building that are critical. First of all, in order to replace Airwave effectively, we must produce a push-to-talk voice solution. WhatsApp and other solutions do not do that. It is certainly true, as Sir Matthew has said, that the market for those voice solutions is considerably more mature than it was four or five years ago. As we go back out to market to replace Motorola, we are seeing several options.



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Secondly, underlying both the voice and the data solution is something called priority and pre-emption, which is absolutely vital for our emergency services. We are not using a standard commercial data product; we are using a commercial data product that has priority and pre-emption, which means that, if we get into busy or stressed situations, our Emergency Services Network traffic will be prioritised and, if necessary, kick off standard commercial users in order to satisfy the critical needs of the emergency services.

We will provide a data bearer that has those facilities, on top of which the emergency services can run other data services that they already have today but with increased coverage and increased reliability because of that priority and pre-emption. We will also build the critical voice solution that the emergency services need. When I say "build", I mean use an off-the-shelf product to provide that service.

Q17 Anne Marie Morris: The challenge is then getting the emergency services to accept the new system and move to it. In the interregnum, they have effectively designed their own systems, which they are using for data transfer, as I understand it. How have you gone about communicating with them? How have you gone about understanding what they are now using to fill the gap? You will have to wean them off it to get them to buy into and use whatever new system you come up with.

Dr Black: Let me first comment on the existing solutions. There are plenty of existing solutions that organisations are using for data, but the critical requirement in replacing Airwave is for a voice solution. That is what we must focus on building.

On working with the emergency services on the acceptance of both the voice and data service, I might ask my colleague, Mr Parr, to comment on this, because he has done more work with the emergency services.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Could I introduce Mr Parr? He is the senior responsible officer. Before this role, he was a police chief.

Chair: We have read your CV, Mr Parr.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The point is that part of the mindset shift of the programme was to put users front and centre. What better way of doing that than to bring in as the SRO a former user, a police chief?

Q18 Chair: I have to say, Sir Matthew, you may be damning yourself. I really welcome the fact that Mr Parr has this background. The Committee would agree with the idea. Frankly, the Home Office represents the fire services and the police. It is great that Mr Parr is here, but this should have been front and centre in the first place without needing a former police chief to enter. Mr Parr, would you like to come in?

Simon Parr: In terms of policing, fire and ambulance moving to the new system, we have done an awful lot of work over the last two years reassuring them that this is being done with them. My frame of reference



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is that this has to work at 3 am in the rain, and they have to be confident that it will work wherever they expect it to work. Certainly, that has turned around their approach to it. There is still a level of caution about a programme that has gone on this long. They wonder when it is going to come, and you would expect that.

We are already getting a push from fire and ambulance in particular to get the data service they were using beforehand, as we were testing it, back up and running. We know they want to use that very quickly; they want that to be live. Policing is by far the greatest number in terms of users. You have rightly identified that they and others have an awful lot of mobile data solutions.

From my previous experience, not just as a chief or a user but as a previous APCO lead looking after emergency planning for UK policing, one of the great benefits of this data system will be the ability for officers not only to speak to each other at the scene of major incidents, but to speak to colleagues from other blue-light services, which they currently cannot do with the data systems they have. They are currently using the existing commercial network with whichever application they have chosen to put on it. This will standardise that.

Having had great interest, as you would expect, in the reports that have come out about the dreadful incidents at Grenfell and Manchester Arena, you can see there is a need for people on the ground not just to be able to hear what is going on but, in very quick time and in highly pressurised situations, see what is going on, in order to make better decisions. One of the benefits of ESN is that it will standardise that. With some clever work in what are called talk groups, where you can allow different groups and different users to move together, video of what is happening on the ground can be shared between the different blue-light services, which is not a function that exists at the moment.

Q19 Anne Marie Morris: That vision is wonderful. My concern is whether it is a vision they have truly brought into, and feel they have been consulted on. What work have you done with the police to survey them and find out what they wanted, before you started looking at developing this great vision? Did you make sure they felt part of it and that it was not just something being done to them? What knowledge have you collected about the current systems they are using in the absence of the final product?

Simon Parr: It is fair to say that policing is probably the most cautious about this of the three blue-light services. By and large, they are beginning to use a greater blend of voice and data. As I say, they have their own data systems.

The work we have done with them is first, as I said, to bring them inside the programme, to make sure they know exactly what we are doing and that they understand that we have a very clear understanding of their requirements and are going to drive to deliver those. That was something



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they were not sure of in the past. They are absolutely certain about it now. They have agreed the requirements with us. They are on the journey of getting the new provider on board. The minimum they are looking for—I speak specifically about policing—is voice capabilities equivalent to what they have with Airwave. I am pretty sure they now believe that is what they are going to get.

Chair: I should refer to the evidence from the National Police Chiefs' Council, ESN0001, which says that mission-critical voice provision is something they back.

Simon Parr: I would understand that. We have done other pieces of work with policing. Last year, the National Police Chiefs' Council approved an adoption strategy. They said, "Provided you deliver what we have asked for, and provided we, as individual chiefs, can be sure that it is reliable, resilient and meets our needs, we will accept this". We have seen that document, and we will continue to work on that document as the system evolves over the next couple of years.

Q20 **Anne Marie Morris:** Have you had all of the emergency services—representatives from fire, ambulance and police—in a room at the same time, so that they can work together on where the dissonance and the similarities are, and the problems that will have to be addressed in the new system?

Simon Parr: Absolutely, yes. Dr Black and I meet the senior representatives of all three services every week. We also meet the chiefs of each of those groups every month or so, when they have board meetings. We regularly update them. As I said earlier, they are on the journey. They are part of the process by which we ensure that the new contract to replace Motorola meets their needs, and ensure that they can see that it will deliver what they want. I am meeting with fire this week, police in a couple of weeks' time, and ambulance again at the next board meeting, at which they will get an update and have an opportunity to ask questions.

Q21 **Anne Marie Morris:** We will then have a large transition programme.

Simon Parr: Yes.

Q22 **Anne Marie Morris:** How will you manage that? How will you get buy-in, given how fragmented what is out there has become because of the gap?

Simon Parr: It is eye-wateringly complex; I am not going to pretend it is not. That is one of the reasons why, in many cases, we are simply starting to look at the logistics. We know the numbers are frightening. There are over 300,000 users who are going to need some form of device, be it ruggedised or not, over 100 control rooms and 40,000-odd vehicles.

We are starting to do that logistical planning now, even though we do not plan to be rolling out much before the middle or end part of 2025, when I



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hope—I emphasise the word “hope”—if the procurements go right, the ESN network will be live for data. I am not giving that as a promise, because we have to go through the procurements, but if it is humanly possible, I intend to have that network live and being used for data at least initially by fire and ambulance, which, as we say, are more keen than the police to go on that journey. That process will allow us to learn how the logistics work. For example, some of the questions we are asking—I cannot imagine what the spreadsheet is going to look like at the end—are, “How many buildings are there in England, Scotland and Wales out of which blue-light teams work?” That starts to give us a clue about where we need to put simple things like battery chargers.

From my experience of having done this in several forces I have worked in, it is often the fine detail, rather than the vision, that causes a problem. That is one of the reasons why I want to make sure the things you ought to take for granted, but in my experience often cannot in major tech programmes, are not the things that trip us up. Where and when do we start to send vehicles driving around the country, handing out radios and batteries? What is the training?

We are starting that work now, even though it may not be used for a couple of years, so we can iterate it and it does not come as a surprise to users when they have to use resources, for which they are hard-pressed, to deliver the functionality inside their organisation.

Q23 Anne Marie Morris: That transition plan will include a communications plan, to make sure everybody in those services is bought into it, rather than it just being something that is done to them.

Simon Parr: Yes, absolutely. We are already working on that. We are also looking at things like training plans. Again, I have experience of training police officers in many different things. Do you train them two weeks before, six weeks before or six months before? We will look at working out how easy it is to familiarise yourself with a new technology.

One of our ambitions, as soon as we have the procurement and the new provider in place, is to get devices out. They will not be the right devices. The software will not be as developed as it needs to be. We are going to get those devices out into as many hands as we possibly can over the next year or 18 months to do two things. First, we want to familiarise people in the blue-light services with what they are going to get. Secondly, we want to listen to people in these services, as we go through the final process of developing and evolving the technology, to make sure we develop it in a way that works for them. As I say, it has to work at 3 am, in the dark, in the rain, with gloves on.

Q24 Chair: Thank you, Mr Parr. Before I go to Sir Geoffrey, it is worth acknowledging that we are hearing some more realism. The last time witnesses were in front of us, we were told that handfuls of things were being deployed and that was counted as progress. That really was not what we understood testing to be, in laypeople’s terms.



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You mentioned the number of buildings. Has there not already been work done to identify the number of buildings out of which blue-light services operate?

Simon Parr: We know some of the big buildings, but from my experience, these things can change quite quickly. Fire and ambulance are reasonably static, but police officers move around; they will change offices; they will change locations. As communities change, you suddenly get a new building that might have an office in it, or a supermarket.

Q25 **Chair:** Are you revisiting old work that has been done, she says hopefully, or are you having to start from scratch, she says, perhaps more realistically?

Simon Parr: I suspect it is probably the latter, but I would need to check, if you wish. We can come back with confirmation. My instinct is that the programme has potentially not gone too far.

Dr Black: We worked with the emergency services on this previously, and we identified a list. It was originally 22,000 locations. When we removed duplicates, it was 15,000. We have done modelling against those. We believe somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000 might need interventions because they will not have signal already. We are now starting the process to survey those and find out which will need solutions to enhance the coverage. We know the size of the challenge in front of us, and we have all the steps in place—

Chair: You are looking at yet another challenge.

Q26 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Sir Matthew, I know this Committee's function is to look forward and try to make this thing work. That is really important. We have now examined this matter on approaching a dozen occasions. Although I am reassured a little this afternoon that you have now identified technical solutions, it does not seem to me like you are one iota further forward when it comes to achieving those technical solutions. In fact, if anything, you are further behind than when we last looked at this matter in 2019.

You have got rid of your delivery partner, KBR. You are about to end the contract with Motorola, which was going to provide the technical side of this. You do not know yet where you are going to be able to procure it. You have spent £2 billion on ESN. It started off life at £240 million. There is an element of complacency about this. I really do not want to be here in another six months' or a year's time going around exactly the same course as we are now. We are going around exactly the same course we have been around several times before.

I am deeply concerned that there is not the urgency in the Home Office to get this thing sorted out. After all, the clue is in the name: Emergency Services Network. There is no more important function in Government than the emergency services being able to communicate with each other in the case of an emergency. It is deeply worrying.



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I like short questions, but I am going into a longer question. There was no driving need to change this thing at all, as Airwave has proved. You are talking about it possibly going on to the 2030s. You started on this programme in 2015. You started on the programme when there was not any driving need. The police did not say, "This system does not work". The Home Office started it. There we are.

I do not see that this thing has moved on one iota since this Committee looked at it in 2019, and therefore I think there is a degree of complacency in the Home Office.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is a lot in that question. Let me unpack it a bit. First of all, I totally agree with you on the need for urgency. Rest assured that we are pressing ahead as fast as we possibly can, subject to the normal risk mitigation on the commercial, legal and technological strategy, bringing users with us and so on.

Secondly, I totally agree on the need to avoid complacency. There is no complacency on this side of the table or on the part of any of the other people who are working on this programme. There have been so many setbacks for this programme. It would be weird if there were to be any complacency. You certainly will not find any anywhere I have been looking.

This is the biggest and hardest of all of the Home Office's programmes, and we have a portfolio that is stuffed full of very difficult programmes. This is the reddest of them all, and that is why it gets such significant attention from me, from Ministers and from the excellent team around me.

The bit I disagree on is the suggestion, similar to what the Chair was saying, that we have not made any progress at all since we last spoke. We have. We continue to make progress. Yes, there have been some setbacks. We accept that Motorola's decision to leave the programme was a setback in terms of the timescale, but it absolutely was not in terms of the value for money for the taxpayer.

The reason they left was essentially because the CMA found they had supernormal profits of £1.1 billion over this period. That is what we are seeking to claw back for the taxpayer. If that means the whole programme takes a bit longer, that is a price worth paying.

Q27 **Chair:** I am sorry. This was predictable. As Sir Geoffrey has highlighted very clearly, the Home Office decided to go down this route when Motorola was on both sides of the equation. The Competition and Markets Authority may have made its interim ruling, but this was something partly of the Home Office's own making.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It was well before my time, but—

Chair: It was not before our time.



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: To be fair to the people who were around at the time, Motorola's acquisition of Airwave came after the contract for ESN. Some people seem to have a sense—you can read this in the CMA's provisional report—that there was some sort of lack of incentive for Motorola to get on with the transition to ESN because they also owned Airwave, but that came along after the original procurement by our predecessors in the Home Office.

Suffice it to say we are totally with you, Sir Geoffrey, on urgency and the need to avoid complacency.

- Q28 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** You say that this intervention by the CMA, which was Home Office-driven, is going to net the taxpayer £1 billion. You will have to spend approaching that on getting some other contractor up to speed from the start to deliver this contract.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have done the sums on precisely that, as you would expect. We will need to spend a bit of money to get whoever the new contractor is up to speed.

- Q29 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** How much?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is an element—it is around about £140 million—that was paid to Motorola to do some things, and we will not be getting the full value we expected at the time from that.

Remember that, when Airwave has switched off, the future system will be saving £200 million per year. As you would expect, we have looked at the financial case very carefully. It does change as the factors change. The CMA is one of the factors. The new procurement is another factor.

There continue to be variables, but, when you look at all of the other potential options, such as stopping the programme altogether, pausing it and then restarting or restructuring, all of those cost the taxpayer more in the long run and therefore do not offer the maximum value for money.

- Q30 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** It is noted that the £200 million a year of savings is set against the £2 billion spend already. That is at least a 10-year payback.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am sorry to interrupt you, Sir Geoffrey, but some of the payment to date is for running the existing system.

- Q31 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I accept that, but we do not know where the costs are going to end up. This still has a long payback. We do not know what that is going to be yet because we do not know what the costs are.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: You are absolutely right: this is a very long-term programme. It will be with us into the 2040s as a minimum. We will be getting payback into the 2040s, probably significantly longer than that. This is a very long-term programme, but we are absolutely determined to crack on and get the benefit from it as quickly as we can and certainly



before the risk of Airwave entering the end-of-life phase starts to increase.

David Kuenssberg: I would just emphasise that there are three variables that we have to bottom out before we can produce a refreshed business case, which will be done by next year. We need to do the re-procurement of lots 2 and 3 and then see the final CMA report. Those are the moving parts. Then we will be able to answer your questions with more accuracy.

Q32 **Chair:** I just wanted to go back on the business case, which you touched on there. You are resetting it again. First of all, did you have enough time to consider plans for resetting? You have a lot of trade-offs to do here. In summary, each time there is a crisis or something happens, there is a sudden reset.

We are veterans. There have been many private papers on this. Predecessors of yours, Sir Matthew, have asked for assessments by outside consultants and so on. We feel like we have been going through this for a long time. In this case, have you had time to do it properly?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Let me kick off and then I will hand over to Simon as the SRO. In addition to the programme, with myself, David and others inside the Home Office, we also have the benefit of an independent assurance panel. They are experts in the field and they do very significant work testing and challenging the direction of travel. They strongly agree with the bit of the answer I just gave to Sir Geoffrey's question about the value for money of the existing programme being far superior to the alternative courses of action of delaying, pausing, restructuring, ending the programme and so on.

The IPA did a recent review of the programme, which also came up with a rather positive set of conclusions about the direction of travel of the programme, the way the leadership of the programme was pursuing this very tricky route and so on. We do have ways of assuring ourselves that we are on the right track, and of changing course if we are not.

Simon Parr: One of the strange roles of an SRO is to sit in the middle and try to look through all the lenses at once. If I were looking purely at this through a commercial lens, I may well have chosen a different model to deliver it. Back in 2013 or 2014, I was the senior police user on the programme. I have seen it from both ends over a very long time.

If I just were looking at this through a financial lens or a technological lens, I may have made different choices. In fact, the Permanent Secretary will remember that, although the route we are taking is my recommended option, it would not necessarily have been the preferred option on a pure technology basis.

I will add two points on that. First, the technology under the current construct does work. We know it works. It was not working as fast or as well as it should have, because of some faults in the way it was being



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delivered, but we know it works. We are confident that we can make it work going forward in the same technological construct.

In commercial terms, the contract itself also works, with some tweaking as we learn some lessons. I was faced with a decision: "What is the best balance between each of those different lenses to ensure we can deliver to the blue-light services something that is reliable, resilient and works, and that allows us to turn Airwave off as quickly as we can?" That was the reason for pursuing the route we are on now.

The original question was, "Have we had enough time?" Motorola originally told me in a letter they were leaving some 16 months ago. We originally started the work then to say, "How do we pursue this? What do we do to get this moving to replace them, in effect, at some point?" That was something we had already considered was a possibility because it was in one of the contingency elements of the business case approved by the MPRG back in July 2021.

We have been thinking about it for quite a long time, taking the assurance advice as Sir Matthew has said. This was my recommended option on balance to swiftly get Airwave turned off without reducing the safety and security of the blue-light people who are using technology that we know works.

Q33 Chair: You talked about there being no complacency, Sir Matthew, but the reality is that you head a Department that has to deliver this for the emergency services. It will happen, because it has to, but that does not mean that the rate of progress is okay. This has been delayed repeatedly. There are now no handsets available. The National Audit Office tells us the handset you had procured will not be supported after 2023. You are expecting the new user services supplier to provide a handset for testing. When will that be, Mr Parr? When will the new handset be provided for testing? We are talking about the delays as though they are just down to Motorola, but it is a bit more complex than that.

Simon Parr: It is more complex than that. You refer to the latest delay. I would like to remind the Committee that the delay is because we now have to re-procure a new provider. I know the Committee says that, but we were working to the plan from the last business case in 2021.

I have two points on handsets. First, the blue-light services always replace their handsets. There is a rolling programme anyway, which I know people understand.

Q34 Chair: They have been buying old handsets to deal with the old system; they could not buy them for the new system, because they did not have confidence in it.

Simon Parr: No, indeed. I am not sure it is a zero sum, in the sense that they are going to have to buy some anyway.

Q35 Chair: They will be staying longer with the new old ones they have



bought.

Simon Parr: These would be the existing Airwave handsets. They do have a reasonable lifespan, but they are now becoming more and more expensive to maintain. We know that, and there is some concern about that. If I could go down that avenue, we are working with the blue-light services to give them a rough idea of how long a period they should be looking at, when it comes to those contracts for replacements, so that they do not end up buying something they replace in a year's time.

Chair: That is a tiny—

Simon Parr: I appreciate that, but we are trying to work with them. In terms of new handsets, looking at Dr Black, we would hope they start to bring some in for testing, even though they may not be the final ruggedised ones, by the back end of next year, 2024.

Q36 **Chair:** We were told they were coming soon the last time we had a hearing on this in 2019.

Simon Parr: There were some around. They were being used for testing at that point.

Q37 **Chair:** There were some. It was handfuls, Mr Parr, as I am sure you know from the front line.

Simon Parr: Yes, indeed. My intention is to put hundreds out there as soon as we have the network and a new provider. As I said earlier, we are going to test the network and find out what the users need.

Q38 **Chair:** Are these off the shelf, or will they have adaptations? What are we talking about? Are they going to be made bespoke for our emergency services, Dr Black?

Dr Black: This is a significant difference from where we were in 2019. In 2019, we were procuring special builds because that was the only way to get the handsets we needed. Increasingly, as the standards and the market mature, they are moving towards off-the-shelf.

We would expect a new user services provider to come along with a handset, one of the industry standard models, already adapted to work with their solution. We will build that into the new user services contract, and that will enable us to drive the main delivery programme through.

In parallel, we are looking at an increasingly developing market in terms of the range of different handsets that are needed. It is a market where many of the basic handsets we need are based on commercial mobile phones, which turn over quite quickly. There is very little point in procuring a handset now for a system that may go live in five or six years' time because all the models will change. We are increasingly moving towards a standardised model, where the handsets are based on the new 3GPP standards, and will be commodity.

Q39 **Chair:** Will each police force, ambulance service and fire service be able



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to choose from a suite of products that meet the technical requirements, or will they all have to have exactly the same handsets?

Dr Black: We are aware there are a range of different requirements, and we will plan to ensure there is an active handset market to match those requirements. For example, there is a need for a ruggedised handset for frontline operational officers. For other officers, there may be a requirement for non-rugged handsets at a lower price. There is a potential role for dual-mode devices that can connect to both Tetra and ESN. There is a range of other requirements as well.

Our primary short-term goal is to make sure we can support testing and deployment through the user services contract, but in parallel with that we will be looking at the range of requirements and the range of handsets required. We will be seeking to create a marketplace where suppliers can supply ESN-conforming handsets and we can make them available to users.

Q40 **Chair:** Mr Parr, you have been on the front line. We have had evidence today from the National Police Chiefs' Council about the challenge of delivering this on the ground. Transition teams were being stood up to do this when we were being assured that it was all about to go out. Those transition teams have now dispersed or been disbanded. What are you doing to set up a system to make sure that each individual user group—each force, ambulance service and so on—has people ready to help the transition? Are you doing it all from the centre?

Simon Parr: No, absolutely not. One of the reasons for the reduction in the size of the teams—they are not being disbanding completely—was the negotiation we had with them. As soon as it became clear that we would not be rolling out in line with the original business case and, as you would expect, being aware of how scarce some of those resources could be, I did not want them to spend time sitting there when there was nothing for them to work on.

Our negotiation with all three emergency services was very simply, "We need to reduce the size of those teams, but do not lose the point of contact". We need to have one point of contact at least, on a small team, even if that is not their main priority, with whom we can work as we develop the training and the communications, and as we do the extremely difficult work on roll-out and logistics.

We have contact points in each of those organisations, the intention being that we can continue to talk to them, prepare them and give them a warning when we need to build those teams up to size again, so that they are ready when we roll out and start to do the deployment.

Q41 **Chair:** It feels a little bit like a yo-yo situation. One of the things that has been raised a lot in the past—we understand this is also in the National Police Chiefs' Council's evidence—is that you have given an assurance, and you said this again today, that you do not expect any emergency



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service to use this until they are confident it will work. When we have pressed on this before, the question becomes whether they effectively have a veto. If you have one small ambulance trust that says, "We are not convinced about this", will that mean it does not get rolled out? As a simple question, at what point would the Home Office force it on people?

Simon Parr: I am not sure that is a question I can answer, because I would not have the authority to do that. I do not believe we will ever get into that situation. I genuinely do not.

- Q42 **Chair:** It could extend the roll-out quite significantly and in quite a costly fashion if, say, 90% of our emergency services were using it but some were saying, "We are not convinced yet". We have had repeated assurances from the Home Office that this will not be forced upon people. You have repeated that today. "Forced" is perhaps the wrong word, but there has to be a point where, if it is going to work, it has to be universal.

Simon Parr: In my view, there will not be an individual organisation that says, "The other 109 of you are all wrong and I am not going to take it". There is the simple practical reality of being able to communicate.

- Q43 **Chair:** I accept that. There are all the barriers in the way. Police forces such as the Metropolitan Police and the Greater Manchester Police are much larger than some of the smaller organisations involved. This could be very costly. If they have had to buy new old kit, which we have just discussed, they will have invested a lot of money in something they have to keep running because they just could not afford to change suddenly, after a few years, to the new kit they need for the new system.

You can see the barriers. Part of the trust in making it work is all of the costs, as well as the practical solutions. What is your crunch organisation? Do you need the Met or the GMP, for example, to take it up? Do you have a hierarchy of organisations you want to take it up? You will be starting with the smaller ones, presumably, as you test and then going to some of the big ones to get them to buy in the bulk.

Simon Parr: I would make two points there. Where we go to and who goes first is more complicated and nuanced than that, and it should be. We will do data first, as I have said, because it will come first. That will allow us to understand more about roll-out, control rooms and the service management that comes in the centre.

There will be logistics issues. I am not going to go to Scotland and take all their 4x4s off the road in the winter. It is a much more complex picture than simply, "We will get the big ones in, and the rest will follow".

We will be looking to roll out to a plan that we are starting to build now. That will change because situations change, but one of the important factors in that plan will be where organisations are in the cycle of replacing their control room software or purchasing devices. If we can adapt and adjust the rollout so that people do not end up buying a whole



new set of Airwave handsets and have to junk them a year later, we will try to do that. We will try to get that level of detail.

Q44 Chair: Back in 2016, there was an original plan with timelines for each whole organisation, with some very small contingencies, which have all been missed, frankly, because it has not been rolled out. You are now saying that it will be different capabilities at different times. One emergency service organisation might get the data, but the voice would follow at a later date. That would mean twin-tracking. That still means they are going to have to have two pieces of kit when they would normally have one. There are also challenges with that.

Simon Parr: In policing, as was pointed out earlier, you already have two pieces of kit.

Chair: At least two.

Simon Parr: There is one for data and one for voice. Fire and ambulance are much more data-led in their deployment. They do not use voice anything like as much, which means the vehicle rollout, which would probably be the first thing we do, would start to take that over as live.

One of the things Dr Black mentioned earlier was the potential for dual-mode devices. The market in those is changing. There have been some problems in the past, but it is evolving. A dual-mode device may ease some of the financial challenges of replacing handsets. If they are able to get a dual-mode device that they can use for Airwave for one or two years, or whatever the time is, and then they can transition across and start using it with ESN, that will ease the burden of those costs.

Certainly, Dr Black and I are looking very closely at what those dual-mode handsets might be, and certainly the price point for them. There is no point in buying them if they cost three times as much as two of the equivalent other ones. Police officers, fire and ambulance will routinely carry more than one device at this point, and I do not see that as being a particular issue.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I want to make a wider point about the centrality of users in this programme. If we were to be in a situation, as your hypothetical questions make out, in which a group of users do not want the product because they do not feel it will meet their needs—

Q45 Chair: It is not a hypothetical question. You may call it a hypothetical question, but it is something that has arisen several times since 2016, since I have been chairing this Committee. We have heard several times that it would not be forced upon any organisation if they were not 100% confident. This is a point Mr Parr has repeated, which has been accepted positively by the National Police Chiefs' Council. That is the reality of your position. If they do not want it, they do not have to have it.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, absolutely. My point is a slightly different one. If we got to a point in the future where there were a group of users



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who felt they had a legitimate need that was not being met by this programme, the programme would have failed. We do not intend to be in that position.

The users are inside the programme. That is the mindset shift we talked about last time. It means we will know much sooner than the actual rollout whether it is going to meet the needs of the users because they are shaping the programme.

- Q46 **Chair:** The users have been inside the programme before. The Metropolitan Police seconded people to the central team to help, because there was not the resource, and to help with the focus on users. It was some time ago now.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I accept that we went from one extreme to the other, but we have made a very significant shift in terms of the centrality of users in the last few years.

- Q47 **Chair:** I want to make two quick points before I go back to Sir Geoffrey. The National Police Chiefs' Council's evidence says that, whilst there may be future operational benefits arising from the capabilities we have discussed, such as around data, geolocation and so on, these have not yet been clearly set out. Mr Parr, would you like to clearly set out those? Why does the National Police Chiefs' Council say that? It is quite concerning.

Simon Parr: This probably refers back to the earlier question around data specifically. In previous business cases, there was a figure put in that was for operational benefits. You say, "You will be able to turn your data off". That was put in. Policing objected to that so it was taken out again. It is not in there at the moment and it will not form part of the business case at this stage.

From my experience, there is a conversation to be had with policing when they have got over their existing concern over when it is going to deliver. Quite reasonably, they are saying, "You have not even shown us the voice yet. Show us the voice. Let us get that working because our prime concern is the voice". That conversation needs to be had at a later time. It may or may not be a financial benefit. From my experience, as I said earlier, it will certainly be an operational benefit, but it may be one we need to discuss with them, fire and ambulance and with colleagues in JESIP, the interoperability programme. This does provide interoperability for small and major incidents that is not there at the moment.

Whilst I do recognise that we are using the word "vision"—that is absolutely correct, and I do understand that—it is not far away because, as soon as the voice and the data exist, it will become a reality.

Chair: We live in hope. Finally from me before I return to Sir Geoffrey, who is going to be paying? This has been a real sticking point for the users out there. Originally, they were expected to foot the bill. As it got delayed, they became more concerned about that, as they were having to



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buy old kit. I do not know whether it is Sir Matthew or Mr Kuenssberg who ultimately holds the purse strings on this. Will the Home Office pay the costs for local police forces where they have already had to spend a lot more money than they were expecting and their financial planning is now out of whack?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is a very complex answer to that question, but the simple answer is that within the cost of the programme is the cost of transition. The Home Office will ensure that we work with users so that the transition is possible and affordable.

Q48 **Chair:** That is not quite the same. Are you funding directly? Maybe Mr Kuenssberg can answer the question. Are you giving direct funding to the emergency services units to buy the bits of kit they need and do the transition work?

David Kuenssberg: We will need to use future fiscal events such as spending reviews to agree how that mechanism will work, but at present the Home Office grants between £11 billion and £12 billion to police forces, for example. Some of that comes back as a contribution towards the system.

Q49 **Chair:** That is not for the individual bits of kit; that is for the central system development. What about for individual handsets?

Dr Black: Within our full business case, agreed with our funding bodies and our users, we have definitions of core and non-core costs. Core costs are funded by the Home Office. Non-core costs, which include, for example, the cost of devices, are funded by the user organisations. We can supply those definitions, if that would be helpful.

Q50 **Chair:** It would be helpful, but the definition sounds a bit technical. Mr Parr has tried to reassure us by saying they will not be buying new old kit, the old Airwave kit, only to be told a year later to junk it.

Simon Parr: If we can help it, yes.

Q51 **Chair:** That could delay the roll-out for quite a while. This is a really big issue. If they are having it funded centrally—it is still taxpayers' money, let us be clear—they might be quicker to adopt it. The challenge is the cost to the taxpayer versus the speed of roll-out. Where is the balance?

Simon Parr: We do not know where that balance is. We are not going to know until we build the delivery timeline and plan and we start to work. For something of this scale, we are never going to meet the needs of every organisation financially. We cannot, but we will do everything we can to minimise the impact, particularly around timing, if it starts to interfere with changes in control room software or device re-procurement.

It would be unrealistic to say that we can do this within the current planned timeline and nobody is going to get their fingers nipped a bit. It is going to happen to police forces, fire services and ambulance services.



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Q52 **Chair:** The timeline trumps the cost to individual organisations.

Simon Parr: There is a balance there. I am not making it as absolute as that. In some cases it may well be there is an unfortunate impact, but we will do everything we can to minimise that and reduce the numbers.

Chair: I am sure police chiefs around the country are listening to that and wondering what it means.

Q53 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** On a point of clarification, the £2 billion figure I referred to—it is quite clearly stated at the front of the report, which you have agreed with—is the forecast amount to be spent on ESN up to March 2023. You said there is a £200 million saving each year. That is a 10-year payback at minimum because you have already spent the money. Do you agree with that? Let us get that clearly on the record.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I agree we have already spent—

Q54 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** This is what the report clearly says. There are these big figures on page 4. I will quote again: £2 billion is the forecast amount spent on ESN up to March 2023. It has been spent. We are at March 2023 now.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, we have spent £2 billion on ESN, and at the time we had also spent £3 billion on Airwave.

Q55 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** That is correct. Dr John, why have you not yet started the process to extend the Airwave contract beyond 2026?

Dr Black: The process to extend the Airwave contract consists of issuing a revised national target shutdown date to Motorola. As part of the change notice agreed in 2019, the contractual process allows us to do that at any time with at least a year's notice. There is no other negotiation necessary so we do not need to issue any extension until the end of 2025. We are investigating right now when the appropriate time to issue that notice is. We are also awaiting the outcome of the CMA investigation.

Q56 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Given that the cost of maintaining Airwave is £250 million a year, surely your entire objective must be to get it switched off as soon as you can get an alternative system working.

Dr Black: That is correct, yes.

Q57 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** What I am really driving at, which is the most important point of all, is whether there is a risk of a gap between Motorola deciding to turn off Airwave and your new system not being in operation.

Dr Black: Indeed, we cannot take that risk.

Q58 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** You cannot take that risk, but is there a risk?



Dr Black: We believe there is no risk because we have a contractual right to extend, using the mechanism I just outlined. Currently, we are studying when the right time would be to issue that revised national target shutdown date to ensure we get continuity of service until ESN is ready.

Q59 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Given this referral to the Competition and Markets Authority, how will you maintain relations with Motorola, so that Airwave can continue working smoothly until it is decided that it is to be turned off?

Dr Black: When we look at Airwave and how it runs today, it runs well and the Airwave team delivers a good service. That too is referenced in the NAO Report. We want that to continue. We have a contract with the ability to extend as required, and we will follow that process.

Q60 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** One of the biggest risks, it seems to me, is that the systems integration—I raised this in the previous hearing—remains with the Home Office. We have seen with the Elizabeth line and indeed HS2 that the biggest risk to very big projects these days is systems integration. How can you be happy? Do you have sufficient expertise within the Home Office to deal with that risk?

Dr Black: That is indeed one of my biggest concerns as a programme director. We must get the systems integration part correct. Part of the balanced decision-making Mr Parr referred to was about looking at whether we should step back from that role and reset the programme entirely with a prime contractor model so it was no longer in the Home Office. If we had a blank sheet of paper, that is probably what we would do, but we do not have one. We need to complete this programme as rapidly as we can.

The assessment we have to make is, “With the right new partners and the right skills supporting the Home Office, can we deliver this programme under the current construct?” Our strong view is, yes, we can. As we re-procure the user services lot, lot 2, we need to ensure we have a strong focus on the systems integration responsibilities, the core push-to-talk responsibilities and the other technical responsibilities that the supplier will need.

Q61 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** That is a very brave statement when we see the errors that have been made in the Elizabeth line and the difficulties HS2 is having. What lessons have you learned in detail from those two big projects and where they have gone wrong? At the moment, the whole digital field is littered with Government not getting it right. We see it on this Committee time after time. That is a pretty brave statement. You do not have the skills yet, but you are going to have the skills in the Home Office to manage this critical element of the project.

Dr Black: Let me say a couple of things. First of all, when we look at our forward procurement, we are looking very hard at what has gone before and the lessons learned from that. There is a headline lesson around



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choosing a supplier that is purely and 100% motivated to ensure delivery. That will be a key criterion in our selection.

There are also a lot of lessons at the individual component level in what we are procuring around the skills we need to run data centres, to run testing and to do integration work, as well as the pure MCX push-to-talk application.

A key part of our lessons learned has been to make sure we are really examining the full range of technical capabilities required of that new supplier. By the way, because of the range of skills, we are confident it will be a consortium, not an individual organisation, in order to bring all those skills to bear. As we examine the proposals we get in, we will be looking very carefully to make sure we have the full range of skills required to deliver this.

The other part of this is that we are looking closely at the team I have to make sure we are strengthening that with additional technical delivery experience. We have just added a very experienced director who has come from the Army to make sure that on the Home Office side we have the right skills and experience.

Q62 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Having the right skills is absolutely critical, is it not? Time after time, we find that Government Departments do not have the right skills in these digital areas. If I were you, I would have gone straight after all the people from the private sector who were doing this for the Elizabeth line, who really know how to do this at the cutting edge. I would have been trying to recruit them. Surely they would have been a much richer source of skills than anywhere else.

Dr Black: Indeed, I have met the CEO of Crossrail and talked about our common challenges. More importantly, we are looking for a delivery partner to supplement our skills. We have published a—

Q63 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: How long is all this going to take? We do not have the luxury of much time, do we?

Dr Black: At the moment we have a Deloitte team assisting us. We are going to the open market as that contract expires and we can no longer renew it by direct award. We are going to the open market within the next couple of months. It will take a few months, basically.

Q64 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Sitting here, what would be your confident date that you will switch Airwave off and have a new system that is working?

Dr Black: We cannot judge that until we have concluded the procurement of a new user services provider.

Q65 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You must be talking to people from whom you are going to procure. You are the technical man. You must have an idea in your mind.



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Chair: Do you have a range?

Dr Black: I have an idea in my mind. We have previously indicated that the original target date of 2026 is now very unlikely to be met. I would find it very difficult to write a plan, even at the highest level, that would achieve that date. I would also comment that the CMA gives us a clear suggestion requirement that we should ensure a competitive marketplace by the end of this decade. Where exactly we fall in that range I cannot tell you until I have done the detailed work and procured a new supplier.

Q66 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Having a competitive market is really important. Again, you are talking to suppliers. Are you confident you will be able to find enough suppliers to have that competitive market? You talk about having a consortium. Are you confident you are going to have that competitive market?

Dr Black: Yes, within a couple of months we will be at the stage in the procurement where we have specific consortia coming forward into the process. At the moment, we have talked to a significant number of candidate organisations and a sufficient number are showing active interest. I am confident we will get a good competition. We will have certainty on that when we get to the next stage of the process in a few months.

Q67 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I want to move the conversation on to one or two other subjects. I read in the evidence—I cannot find where it is, but I want to ask you this technical question—that there is a concern that the 4G penetration into some of these police stations we have been talking about is not as good as the current 2G that Airwave works on. Is there any concern about that?

Chair: To be clear, this is in the National Police Chiefs' Council's evidence.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you, Chair. I knew you would find it for me.

Dr Black: Airwave is technology that is similar to 2G, but it is actually somewhere between 2G and 3G. It is not one of the Gs at all. It is a different technology. The wavelength on which it operates means it naturally penetrates buildings better.

On the other hand, there are just shy of 4,000 Airwave masts across Great Britain, and there are going to be about 20,000 EE masts that will transmit the ESN signal. There are compensating factors there. Nevertheless, the issue of in-building coverage is very important to our users, which is why we have, as I mentioned earlier, what we call critical operational locations, where we will both model and start measuring this year whether the signals are transmitting successfully in those critical building locations.



We have a range of potential solutions, varying from boosters that can be put inside buildings to use of building Wi-Fi, all of which we have proven. Yes, it is a concern, but it is one we think we can manage.

Q68 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: While we are on the technical side, just to complete it and keep everything tidy, have you identified technical solutions to all of the applications you are likely to need? That will include helicopters, the Tube and underwater. Have you identified technical solutions for everywhere else you are likely to need to be able to communicate?

Dr Black: I will pause before I say yes because that would be a brave thing to say. Let me run through this. We have designed the technical solution for air to ground, which is aircraft above 500 to 10,000 feet. We have proven that in trials. There is still more modelling to do to confirm that we have the right number of masts and the right signal strength, but we have a programme of work designed to prove that.

We have tested and proven ESN in the maritime area up to 12 miles out to sea. We have done complete coastline surveys of Great Britain. That has all been successful. We have 71 special locations, which include things like the Mersey Tunnels, the Newcastle metro and the Liverpool metro.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: There is the underground.

Dr Black: I will come to the underground separately because it is not part of the 71. All of those 71 are now built with commercial mobile coverage active in them, so ESN will work there.

We let the concession for the London Underground programme last year. It is being built at the moment. We have proven the solution. If you travel from Westminster to Stratford, you will have the joy of being able to receive mobile phone calls. That was our testbed line. It is fully operational. We are now in the rollout stage with a target of completing by the end of 2024.

We have about 292 masts in remote and rural areas, most of which are built in the sense that they are physically there. The programme to complete transmission to them has a target of the end of 2024. It is not all there, but we have clear plans that are not on a critical path to achieve the coverage we need.

Q69 Mr Djanogly: Good afternoon. Chair, I have not had the benefit or perhaps the pain of following this contract over a long period of time. Just coming in and standing back from it, there seems to be an element of exclusivity here, as though we are the only country in the world that deals with communications to emergency services. I would just like a clear idea, Dr Black, as to what is going on overseas. What do other countries do? Presumably they all have some system. How do the best systems in the world differ from what you want to see?



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Dr Black: Earlier, Sir Matthew referenced our independent assurance panel, which provides independent assurance to the Permanent Secretary. The panel reviewed what was happening globally for us a couple of years ago and confirmed a couple of things. First of all, globally, pretty much all countries are moving towards an LTE-based solution, much like we are. The implementation approaches differ. Sometimes people are deciding to build a dedicated network. Sometimes people are insisting that more than one mobile network operator should participate. Pretty much all countries are on the same journey as us.

Q70 **Mr Djanogly:** That was two years ago.

Dr Black: That was two years ago, but much of it is still current.

Q71 **Mr Djanogly:** Presumably things have moved ahead, have they not?

Dr Black: Things are moving on. The standards that apply to this new type of technology are called 3GPP. Globally, there are about 750 companies that are interested in investing in that technology versus about 20 that are still interested in investing in Tetra. Two years ago, the CTO of ETSI said that Tetra would become obsolete towards the end of this decade.

Within the last month I have met with representatives from Belgium, Finland, France and the USA. They are all on the same journey as us. They have different challenges and different timescales, but they are all broadly targeting completion at around the end of this decade. We are very much on a similar journey to other countries. Some countries have solutions live already.

Q72 **Mr Djanogly:** Forgive me for being basic about this, Chair, but, given the failures of this contract so far, why would it not be cheaper just to scrap the project and adopt, even if it is not quite as good, what someone else has done that works?

Dr Black: The first thing to say is that, whatever technical solution you use at the heart of it, all of that work on coverage would need to be done one way or another. It is mostly done already.

Chair: This is about the EE masts.

Dr Black: In effect, scrapping the project would mean restarting and redoing all that work.

Q73 **Chair:** Could you not use the EE masts that are already there, which the Home Office controls?

Dr Black: We could, but why would we do that versus leaving that part of the project in place?

Q74 **Mr Djanogly:** Would it be cost-efficient to do that?

Dr Black: We do not believe so, or we would have chosen that route. We are re-procuring. ESN is like a big jigsaw. We have taken out a core



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piece, which is the user services push-to-talk app, and we are seeking to replace it with a new provider. We are not looking to start a bespoke development. If that new provider brings along a market solution that is in use in other countries, that would be genuinely helpful. We are looking for one of the several industry standard solutions to plug the hole left by Motorola.

Q75 Mr Djanogly: You would be happy if something else came out from abroad that was going to work for that bit of the programme.

Dr Black: For that bit of the programme, yes.

Simon Parr: One of the differences between now and 2015, and even 2019, is there are many more countries doing this, as Dr Black has said. That means there is more choice, but it also means we are going to be able to look very closely at an application, if somebody brings one. That is the key different piece. There are a number of people who know how to do the network bit behind it, which is what mobile phone operators do. The application is the unusual piece.

Back in 2015 and into 2019, there was the original WAVE 7000, which Motorola had. Kodiak was their other application. When we put out a note to the market some time back, even at that stage, 11 companies came back to us. We know there are a number there.

A recent contract has just been issued in France with one of the applications we are looking at. We would not be surprised—indeed, we would be quite interested—if the company that owned the application were part of the bid going forward in the next few months. That would allow us to work with colleagues in France in terms of development together, and we would be able to learn lessons from them, if they are a few months ahead of us.

Q76 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Sir Matthew, you and Dr Black have referred to the assurance panel. Can I just take you to paragraph 1.15? I will quote from it: "In February 2020, the programme's independent assurance panel reported that the Home Office did not fully test early ESN products as well as it could have, contributing to the delays. This delayed two ESN products by five months and led to the cancellation of a third". How is the assurance panel working with the Home Office, if that happened?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are working with them extremely closely. I have monthly meetings on this, to which the head of the assurance panel, Simon Ricketts, comes whenever he can. He and his panel work very closely with Simon, John and the programme team continually behind the scenes, as well as at some set moments when they provide more formal assurance, or do a particular project, like the international comparisons they did in 2021.

Q77 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That is quite a serious incident, delaying two ESN products by five months and leading to a cancellation of a third.



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How can this Committee, Parliament and the public have confidence that the assurance panel is working properly, and that you are working with them?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Do you want to talk about that particular example, Simon? Then I will come back on the overall way of working.

Simon Parr: That particular incident was a field test of a solution, which needed to be run in the event three times before it finally worked. By the way, I would observe that that is not entirely unusual on technology programmes with new technology. Indeed, that is why you do testing. If you knew you were going to pass every test, you would not bother to do them. Having said that, the plan at the time did not accommodate the need to re-test. That caused some delay. It was one of many factors that have caused delay over the last several years.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: To answer the part of your question about the ways of working between the panel and the Home Office, in addition to what I said earlier, the first priority of the IAP is to provide independent assurance. That is what they do. They work directly with me, with the SRO, with the programme director and with others. We get extremely good value from a very heavy-hitting set of panellists.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you for that reassurance.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have also just done a review of the panel and how it should work.

Q78 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Paragraph 2.5 on page 29 says, "In June 2022 the Home Office initially preferred to establish a prime ESN supplier rather than replacing the user services supplier alone". That was Motorola. "However, in August 2022, it decided to discount this approach as a full re-procurement of all contracts would delay the programme by three years. It will now re-compete the user services contract". We have built in a three-year delay by getting rid of Motorola, have we not?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No.

Simon Parr: Perhaps I could come in. There is a reasonably complex answer. First, Motorola leaving built in a delay by necessity because we knew we were going to have to replace them and start this work again. Their decision to go certainly set us back. One of the things the CMA refers to in some detail—I am neither implying nor asking anyone to infer that any of this was deliberate—is that delay, put bluntly, would have been Motorola's friend because of the extension of Airwave.

One of the things we discovered during my time in the programme, which was just over two years, is that the delay to the delivery of what was originally supposed to enable us to complete the business case by 2026 was already pushing us back. The delay now from having to re-procure is probably—I am looking to John—somewhere between 15 and 24 months



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beyond where Motorola were telling us we would have got to anyway. That is immensely frustrating.

The re-procurement caused by Motorola's exit is probably going to add a year or maybe 18 months, depending on how the roll-out goes. Assuming there are no surprises in the CMA report, that time will be at a lower cost to the taxpayer than it would have been. It is hugely to be regretted, but it is a simple fact that having to replace a key supplier has extended the timeline.

Q79 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Can I take you to figure 12 on page 36?

Chair: It is not happy reading.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: There is an awful lot of red there, and an awful lot of uses of the word "risk". There is one in virtually every single category: technology, commercial, user and the wider programme. I am only a layman, Sir Matthew, but it seems like there is still an awful lot of risk in this whole project, is there not?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There absolutely is. As I said earlier, Sir Geoffrey, this is the Home Office's reddest programme. Page 36 of the National Audit Office Report brings that alive graphically. This is the programme's own assessment. This is a programme that is very transparent. It is 'fessing up to any and all concerns. That is the right way of running a programme.

As earlier questions implied, we also need to learn from other programmes. That is why I mentioned the IPA and the review that it did. It is taking best practice from across Government and ensuring we can judge ourselves against that and learn lessons where we can. I am pleased to say it was very favourable in its assessment of this programme now, which is a testament to the people on both sides of me. We will keep going on that. Of all the things I would want to be really clear to the Committee about, I would emphasise the lack of complacency. There is absolutely no room for complacency.

Q80 Chair: I refer to my point earlier. This will have to be delivered whatever it costs, because failure is not an option. We need to be a bit more convinced on the numbers. Sir Geoffrey will pick up on that.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Failure is not an option, but the redness of the programme is something that we all accept. We are all working on that and we are breaking it down, as this diagram implies, into lots of different sub-components. We are ensuring that our best people are on the reddest parts of this.

Q81 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: To put you to the test, paragraph 2.29 makes it clear you are going to do a business case in 2024, which will tell us, not just your answers today, precisely the timescales and costs. Can you tell us when in 2024 that business case is going to be available?



Simon Parr: We would hope to do that by the end of this financial year, so that would be in the first quarter. It is dependent on us completing the procurement we are going through because we need to negotiate prices and get to best and final offers from the supplier.

Q82 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I understand that absolutely, Mr Parr, but how confident are you that you going to stick to the timescale of the first quarter of 2024?

Simon Parr: We are as confident as we can be at this point in what will be a complex process. We are looking to use a process that gives us the best chance to properly examine, test and down-select any applicants. Put bluntly, neither this Committee nor anyone else would want me to rush that and pick the wrong one.

Q83 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** No, we like realistic answers on this Committee.

Simon Parr: I still believe that is realistic. Hopefully nobody would accuse John and me of being complacent, having worked on this for a number of years together. It may drift into the early part of next financial year, but that will purely depend on the procurement process.

The team are looking to move at pace on this, and I have said to them—I will defend this position—that I would rather spend an extra six weeks or two months now than spend 18 months fixing it later. One of the recommendations from our colleagues in the NAO—as you know, we accept all those recommendations—is not to put an arbitrary timeline on this but to get it right.

The fact that this is inevitable does not mean we will not do the due diligence. I will not allow the process to move at a pace that does not allow me to exercise my responsibility to Parliament in ensuring not that this is done quickly but that it is done well.

There are three tests that all of the procurements have to pass. They have to be affordable, they have to provide value for money and they have to be credible. Everyone in the programme knows those three tests have to be passed at each stage of the procurement process and at each point in the rollout before I will be content to turn around to my colleagues and say, “You can start to use this in mission-critical situations”.

Chair: If we can hit the credibility test, that would be a major improvement on previous sessions.

Q84 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I wholly endorse that answer. We would much rather you did it well and properly than rushed it trying to meet an arbitrary target.

To put you to the test, figure 12 on page 36 is pretty dreadful reading. If we ask the NAO to re-evaluate that table once you have done the



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business case, would we see a considerable difference in the risk that we are facing to this project?

Simon Parr: I believe so because a number of the risks in there are the risks one would expect at the beginning of a procurement process. If we are in a position to complete that business case, it will mean we have found suppliers for lots 2 and 3, which will allow us to have that plan.

There will still be risks because of the incredible complexity of this and the need to ensure the user requirements are absolutely fulfilled by the application in particular. If we reach the point where we have a business case, by definition we will have the costs, which means we will have suppliers, which means we can make the plan.

Q85 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: In your very interesting answer, you said that one of the risks to the project is resources. Sir Matthew, how and when will you know you are going to be given sufficient resources from the Treasury? Presumably that will not be until you have made a business case.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As Mr Kuenssberg suggested earlier, there are future fiscal events and future spending reviews, into which we will bid for resourcing for this programme alongside every other. We are also working hand in glove with our colleagues in Treasury, Cabinet Office and elsewhere as we go through all the different processes, as you would expect.

Chair: There is no guarantee of funding.

Q86 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Yes, exactly. Was that one of the reasons why you would ideally like to get this done in the first quarter of next year? In other words, would you like to get it done before the next financial year so that you hopefully get the resources you need when it comes to procuring the project?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We know our resources for the next financial year. We do not know the timing of the next spending review anyway.

Q87 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You do not know what this project is going to cost until you procure it.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is true.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You will have to get resources at the end of the day, and you will have to procure them from the Treasury.

Simon Parr: I have a couple of pieces of detail. We are back in front of the Major Projects Review Group in April to make sure they understand where we are and that Cabinet Office and Treasury can get a proper look at this and endorse or otherwise, with recommendations, the position we have taken, particularly in terms of the commercial strategy we have gone for. The reason for getting the business case done by then is not particularly because it is the first quarter of next year. It is because if I



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say, "You can do it next year", it could drift. I am setting a target; I am prepared for it to move, but it has to move for a reason. Once we have the business case, we will then again go back to MPRG because that is the process one goes through to ensure we have the resources.

Chair: We are aware of that process.

David Kuenssberg: In this case, it is quite helpful that there is a lot of scrutiny from MPRG and fiscal events, et cetera, because it means the centre of Government really understands where we are with this programme. That is the reason why we had what was the right amount of funding for this programme through the spending review. That has changed since it has been pushed back, but that extra scrutiny is really helpful in securing funds for this programme. I suspect we will get what we need at the next spending review.

Q88 **Chair:** From the Treasury's point of view it is probably a prerequisite after what has happened. Is there any suggestion, Sir Matthew, that you as accounting officer might have to fund some of this out of your core budget as a result of some of the delays and problems you have experienced in the past?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We keep all of these prioritisation decisions under constant review. Some of the funding we receive from the Treasury is ring-fenced for particular reasons, and other parts of it are for us internally to make decisions on.

Q89 **Chair:** Are you likely to make cuts elsewhere to fund this?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I can assure the Committee that this will continue to be a very high priority for me personally and for us collectively.

Q90 **Chair:** That is not quite an answer to my question. Are you likely to make cuts elsewhere to help fund this?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will manage our budget as we always do, comparing different priorities and different things. Where there is no flexibility at all—

Q91 **Chair:** The Treasury Officer of Accounts is sitting here listening. I am sure that will get fed back to the Treasury. If some of us were in the hot seat in the Treasury making decisions, were that ever to be the case, we would probably say that the Home Office has not covered itself in glory in handling this project.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We do this in very close concert with our colleagues in the Treasury and the Cabinet Office. The MPRG, the Major Projects Review Group, is an important gateway that we have to go through. We cannot go forward at different stages without their support and approval. We are doing this with them, and we are all in this together.

Chair: We know where we stand on this.



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Q92 Anne Marie Morris: Can I now look a little bit further into the relationship with Motorola? I appreciate that, because of the confidentiality clause, you cannot give us answers with regard to the contract, but it would help us if we could understand the relationship with Motorola, quite how it broke down and why it broke down when it did. We need to understand why it went wrong so it does not happen again.

I am curious. In June 2021, you approved the business case with Motorola. In July 2021, you then committed to us that you were going with Motorola. By November 2021, everything had gone wrong. Motorola was telling you it was considering ending the contract. You had referred them to the CMA. Just talk me through what happened. In June or July, you signed off on the business case and you said to us that everything was signed with Motorola. Something clearly went wrong. You discovered they were making excess profits. Why did you not discover that earlier?

Simon Parr: We were aware of the size of the profits, which is why we made the referral to the CMA. I believe that was May 2021. In terms of the normal running of the contract, earlier that year John, who joined the programme in August 2020, had started bringing a little more rigour into the management of the contract than perhaps Motorola were used to. That was already going on.

When I joined the programme, which was in March, we were concerned about the speed of their delivery and the quality of what was happening through the testing. There was not any one trigger. There were two or three things going on at once. If you wish him to, I am sure in a minute John will talk about the process that was going on to improve delivery confidence. Motorola said, "We will bring in experts from outside and help rebuild the technical environments that are causing the problem".

These things were running in parallel. In fact, when we went through the MPRG in July of that year, one of the conditions was that we needed to have contingencies in case, for one reason or another, or by one route or another, Motorola chose not to deliver most of its contract or indeed all of it by taking the Airwave app as well. We had that contingency in the plan, which the MPRG recognised and made it a condition, because we were aware that there might come a point where Motorola needed to exit the programme.

As we went forward, Motorola first said, "What about discussing some issues around the contract in a bit more detail, to do with how we make this work?" As I mentioned earlier, a month after the CMA said, "We are going to launch a formal investigation, with a forced sale of Airwave being one of the potential remedies", Motorola said, "We are out at the end of 2024". Motorola wrote to me and said, "We are out because of that risk". There were lots of things going on at once.

Q93 Anne Marie Morris: Dr Black, you brought the rigour to this. Given that you had discovered these financial challenges in May, I am still a bit surprised you signed off the business case without any question in June



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and then confirmed to us in July you were still happy with Motorola.

Dr Black: I have a couple of points to mention. First of all, as Mr Parr has already referenced, we signed it off but supplied contingency options as well because we were at least aware of the possibility that we would be unable to deliver with Motorola.

Secondly, in terms of the issues we had with Motorola, it is absolutely not uncommon to have issues with suppliers. It is important to work hard to resolve them. Had we been able to resolve them, that would have delivered a faster outcome for the programme.

Q94 **Anne Marie Morris:** That is true, but surely you recognised that referring them to the Competition and Markets Authority was an Exocet, and the result was going to be what eventually happened.

Simon Parr: If I may, I always knew there was likely to be an impact on the programme. It is hugely to be regretted that we are not going to get value from some of the money we spent with them. I have mentioned before to Sir Matthew that the reason the number resonates with me is the amount we are not going to get value for is about what I had to run a police force for an entire year. The other side of that equation—they have to be looked at together—is that, unless there is a surprise from the CMA, the money the taxpayer will not spend on running Airwave, which it would have had to spend with the programme not in existence, would allow me to run my police force for approximately eight years.

Q95 **Anne Marie Morris:** It seems to me there was something fundamentally wrong with the decision-making that led to such a financial fall-out, which meant you did not address the problems with Motorola earlier. That is of concern to me and to the Committee. What have you learned about how you will deal with relationships with contractors like this? What would you do differently going forward? I sincerely hope it will not be to do what you did this time round, which is to delay and then to go to the CMA.

Simon Parr: The CMA referral is around a separate contract. I appreciate it is the same parent company, but the Airwave contract is a separate business under Motorola's umbrella and a separate contract. Although it has had a dramatic impact on the programme, I still stand by the decision to refer as the right thing to do, based on what we have seen from the provisional reports.

Q96 **Anne Marie Morris:** Are you surprised at their reaction?

Simon Parr: I am surprised that it was as extreme and as swift as it was. It happened within a month of the investigation phase having started. They did not wait until the end of it. It perhaps told me something about their approach to the two different contracts they were going to make a choice on that they made that decision quite so quickly.

Q97 **Anne Marie Morris:** It must have been clear that there was a real threat to their business, if they were going to be required to sell off a nice little



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earner in Airwave.

Simon Parr: Certainly, that threat caused them to write the letter. I have the letter. It is a direct quote. Even the risk of it meant they were under threat. That is why they took their decision.

The conflict of interest that is at the heart of this goes way back to the purchase of Airwave. It was not long after I left as the senior user, but I remember it was being mooted. There were some real challenges. The information at the time, I believe, was that there was a risk that the previous owners had said they would not extend the contract to 2019 and would just turn it off. If there is somebody who is prepared to buy it and undertakes to manage it through the life of the programme, that was not necessarily an unreasonable decision. What the CMA shows us is, over time, Motorola developed a conflict of interest, which led to some of the things we now know that we could not have known without the CMA investigating and publishing a selection of some of the internal memos and emails that were in the CMA report from inside Motorola.

One of them said—I am paraphrasing; this is not a direct quote—how pleased they were that ESN was going to be extended. Certainly, the CMA's interpretation—this is also my reading of it, and I think it is fairly clear—was that the best result for Motorola was for ESN to succeed but be delayed. We could not have known that at the time.

Q98 **Anne Marie Morris:** In the future, how will you change your decision-making processes?

Simon Parr: Again, this is in the CMA report, and it is a recommendation we are very strong about. Do not have a conflicted supplier. I know it sounds simple now, but it is really clear. John and I are very clear that sometimes complex problems require simple solutions. Do not have a conflicted supplier. Make sure you have your requirements right; make sure you have a shared understanding of what those requirements are like when they are delivered between you, your users and the supplier; and hold your supplier very firmly to account on delivery to the point where everybody knows what they are doing, the contract becomes something that people abide by and you develop a proper partnership with someone who is not just motivated to deliver their side of the contract but who buys into the need to deliver this service.

Q99 **Chair:** As you say, it is not rocket science. As a Committee, we have highlighted this conflict for a long time. Sir Matthew, what worries you about this project? What is the biggest risk from your perspective as accounting officer?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It continues to be the reddest programme, and it is red because it is over time and over budget. Even with the best team we can assemble, and even with the best governance arrangements we can get, and even learning all the lessons we have about how to manage future contracts, as Simon has quite rightly just mentioned, there is a very significant amount of risk inherent in this.



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The biggest thing in the relative short term is getting the procurement right for the new supplier to come in. That is an absolutely crucial part of the jigsaw, as John referred to earlier. That is the biggest thing in the short term. In the longer term, it is about getting into transition. Your Committee has quite rightly been pushing us on those plans. As I hope you can tell from today, there is absolutely no complacency. Equally, there is a lot ahead.

Q100 Chair: There is a lot ahead. The last time you were in front of us, we were talking about transition being imminent. There was testing of handsets. Dr Black, you have had a really big career in IT and tech. Is there a blight on this scheme now? Will you get good bidders coming in because of the challenges ahead? On the one hand, it is possibly a cash cow; if it is seen as a long-delayed project, that is potentially lots of money for someone. On the other hand, it has not gone very well, has it?

Dr Black: There is absolutely not a blight on this. When I look at the technical and technology challenges around this, I believe they are eminently manageable, albeit that it remains a big and complex programme.

For me, the key to big and complex programmes is an absolute rigorous focus on the basics. It is about making sure, as we have done, that we have the requirements for transition nailed down with our users and subject to change control. We have to make sure that we have suppliers who are genuinely motivated to deliver, so that we have shared interests all around; and we have to make sure, particularly as we look for a new user services provider, that we look at the full range of capabilities required and have all the right skills, capabilities and tools.

Q101 Chair: In the past when we have looked at this, there has been huge over-optimism. Optimism bias has been a real challenge for the Home Office corporately. From each of your perspectives, Mr Parr having been on the user side, Sir Matthew as the accounting officer coming in partway through and Dr Black as the technical expert, do you agree there was, frankly, naive over-optimism on this? Can you convince us that there is now not an optimism bias but a practical approach that will deliver this project, as you have suggested you want to?

Simon Parr: In the past, the programme has been pushed to deliver to time. That was one of the challenges in its very early stages. There potentially was a hangover from that in the time around 2018, 2019 and a little bit beyond that.

Quite understandably, that has led to a programme—as I said, I was on the other side of the table at the beginning, to a certain extent—where people say, “We will believe it when we see it”. There is no suggestion now that we are complacent. I keep using that word. There may have been some optimism in the past that, in particular, transition could happen much quicker than the users were ready.



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The last business case from 2021, which changed because of Motorola, was the first one that had been agreed by the users since 2015. In that one, we had an agreed transition window with them. We now know how difficult it is.

Q102 **Chair:** You are talking about transition windows, rather than fixed points in time.

Simon Parr: Yes.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: One of the only benefits of all this delay and overrun is that it has squeezed out any sense of optimism bias. I am glad to say there is a very realistic assessment every time I speak to the programme, which is at least monthly. It is a very realistic assessment coming from them.

Q103 **Chair:** You are getting honest bad news, as well as—

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, absolutely. There is a broader point about optimism bias, not just in the Home Office but across the Civil Service. It is a cultural issue.

Chair: It is a big problem.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: On a programme like this, the very best people have come in from outside, from technology and the user community, to run the programme with colleagues who will be the beneficiaries of that. That has really forced us to be realistic where previously there was optimism.

Dr Black: One of the big lessons learned from my 30-plus years in IT is that giving an optimistic picture might get you through the next meeting, but it will ultimately get you more problems down the road.

Chair: This Committee is living proof of that.

Q104 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Sir Matthew, hearing Mr Parr's warning about Governments getting into a position where their existing supplier is also conflicted with a future procurement, what are the lessons for Government to learn? Should Motorola have been referred to the CMA at the moment it bought Airwave?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Certainly, those of us who came in after that point do look back with the benefit of hindsight and wish that history had had run itself in a slightly different way. There is absolutely something in that. It is clearly not for us in the Home Office to say exactly how other bits of the system should run their programmes.

Q105 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** There is a general principle here, is there not? I wonder what the lesson to be learned from that is. That is really where the whole thing started to go wrong.



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: As a general principle, this is exhibit A in ensuring you do not have that conflict of interest. We are getting there the hard way. We will ultimately be successful, I hope, if the provisional CMA report gets confirmed in terms of the outcome for the British taxpayer. There has been a very circuitous route to get to the right answer.

Chair: We should be clear that it is not just the Motorola issue that has been a problem. The programme has been beset with problems, which we have teased out a bit today.

Q106 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I just want to ask two or three more really important questions. On the EE contract, are you really satisfied technically, Dr Black, that it is wise to be procuring the main communication system from one of the main suppliers in this country? Would it not have been better, as you are going to do with the systems, to have had a consortium of communications people supplying this?

Dr Black: Again, that is a really interesting question. On the one hand, it would be nice to have available to us all the range of networks from all the mobile network operators across the country. On the other hand, that would significantly increase the complexity in the programme. Complexity can be really challenging for big programmes.

Q107 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** We are really tight on time. Can I just ask one further question? How will you ensure EE does not become a monopoly supplier in the way Motorola did?

Dr Black: We are looking to make sure, across the piece, we are standard-based and we use standard solutions. We are also going to run a specific study to look at maintaining ESN for future competition.

As soon as we have gone through the transition and go live, and have completed the Airwave shutdown, we want to be able to return to an open market competition and study what measures we need to take to ensure we do not get locked in. The key to that is being standards-based at all levels, which we are.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed to our witnesses for their time. The transcript will be on the website uncorrected in the next couple of days, and we will be producing a report after the Easter recess.