

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Emergency Services Network: progress review, HC 886

Wednesday 21 February 2018

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Members present: Meg Hillier (Chair); Martyn Day; Caroline Flint; Gillian Keegan; Shabana Mahmood; Layla Moran; Stephen Morgan; Anne Marie Morris; Lee Rowley; Gareth Snell.

Sir Amyas Morse, Comptroller and Auditor General, Adrian Jenner, Director of Parliamentary Relations, National Audit Office, Tom McDonald, NAO, and Marius Gallaher, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, were in attendance.

Questions 50-85

Witnesses

Joanna Davinson, Chief Digital, Data and Technology Officer, Home Office, and Stephen Webb, Senior Responsible Owner, Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Upgrading emergency service communications: the Emergency Services Network (HC 627)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Joanna Davinson and Stephen Webb.

Q50 Chair: Welcome back to the Public Accounts Committee on Wednesday 21 February 2018. This is just a very quick update, we hope—so quick questions and quick answers, please—on the future of the emergency services network. To recap, this is the programme that is going to replace Airwave for our emergency services. That is something that this Committee has followed with interest. We were particularly interested to look at it today, because we were expecting the outcome of a Home Office review of this, but we are clearly not at that point yet, so that is one of the issues we want to talk about. The permanent secretary has written to us as a Committee, outlining where things are at.

I am pleased to welcome today Joanna Davinson, who is the chief digital, data and technology officer at the Home Office, and who is here because the permanent secretary is unwell, although I'm sure you are here in your own right, too, Ms Davinson. Can we just explain where you fit into the Home Office hierarchy? It's a big title. Are you a director or a director general, and does your title cover everything you cover?

Joanna Davinson: I report directly to Philip Rutnam.

Chair: The permanent secretary.

Joanna Davinson: The permanent secretary. I joined the Department three months ago, and at that point, Sir Philip, the permanent secretary, took the decision that the ESMCP would report into my organisation. It had previously been led from within the crime, police and fire group. So I am—

Q51 Chair: Are you a director general? Forgive me for not—

Joanna Davinson: No, I'm a director.

Q52 Chair: Okay, but you report directly to the permanent secretary. How long have you been at the Home Office?

Joanna Davinson: Three months.

Q53 Chair: Where were you before?

Joanna Davinson: I was at IBM.

Chair: So you have come from the technology sector. Stephen Webb probably needs no introduction. He is the senior responsible owner of the emergency services network and a frequent flyer with this Committee. I'm going to hand straight over to Shabana Mahmood to quickly get us a recap



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on where we're at on this issue.

- Q54 **Shabana Mahmood:** Welcome, Ms Davinson; welcome back, Mr Webb. This is our fourth session on this in the Public Accounts Committee following the National Audit Office Report in September 2016. We have had an update letter from the permanent secretary, Sir Philip, dated 13 February. It brings us up to speed in some respects, but is deeply unsatisfactory in other ways. I am sorry that he is not here to answer questions on it. Let's deal first with the slightly good news bit, which is that there is an agreement now between Vodafone and Motorola on the contingency to take us through to the period when finally everybody gets their act together and the ESN is online and operational. We don't really have a lot of detail about that deal. Could you, Mr Webb, sketch out some more of the details about what has happened and when?

Stephen Webb: Yes. It was just signed a few weeks ago. There has been some fairly careful testing of the product, so about six months of testing. The contract has now been signed, and we understand that the new solution will be ready in time for that March 2020 date, at which point Vodafone were looking to be withdrawing the old TDM service. Vodafone will be providing essentially a replacement service over standard IP kind of technology.

- Q55 **Shabana Mahmood:** You will know that this Committee was very concerned about the issue of cost, in particular, in relation to this solution being found between Vodafone and Motorola. What has happened on cost? How much is this going to cost?

Stephen Webb: This is a subcontractor for Motorola/Airwave. It falls to them. There is no additional cost for us.

- Q56 **Shabana Mahmood:** None at all, and we won't be picking any up as the solution is being built?

Stephen Webb: No.

Shabana Mahmood: That is a fairly concrete answer. I am glad that we have finally got to that point. You say this is going to be ready by March 2020. I don't want to be cruel, but the timescaling of the emergency services network does not fill me with a huge amount of confidence about timescales for something that will be very urgent by March 2020, because we have no other contingency, so what confidence can you give me and the Committee that this really is a proper deadline and is not going to slip, and things are not going to be missed in the way they have been with the emergency services network?

Stephen Webb: This is a contractual relationship between Motorola and Vodafone as a subcontractor. Essentially, Vodafone are building this new solution in order to enable them to retire their old solution, so we would expect them to meet that timescale or, if not, to keep the old solution going for longer.

- Q57 **Chair:** Is it possible to keep the old solution going for longer?



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Shabana Mahmood: That is not the tenor of the evidence that has been given previously about the old solution and its ability to continue beyond March 2020.

Stephen Webb: As a technology, TDM is being used; some countries have rolled it out quite recently, with a plan to use it for 10 years. It has clearly been a strategic decision for Vodafone to withdraw it, but we will not expect them to withdraw it until they have built the replacement for it, which is part of the deal they have had with Motorola.

Q58 **Shabana Mahmood:** Forgive me—perhaps I am misinterpreting your demeanour—but you seem a bit hands-off about the Vodafone-Motorola relationship, as if it is their problem and their issue and they are going to sort out the costs. Forgive me, but that is not really acceptable, given the mess we are in with the replacement and where the emergency services network is going to be. We will come on to the issues with that. That cannot be what you are trying to express here today. Would you like to be a bit clearer, please?

Stephen Webb: We absolutely hold Motorola to account to deliver this service. We are buying a service. As part of that, they have a number of relationships with sub-contractors that they need. They can't do it all themselves; they need additional support, functionality and technology. This is one of those. It is not a direct relationship for us. We have taken a keen interest in this and we have looked at it very closely, and we are very glad to see that the development has happened, but it has always been the case that contractually they were required to keep the service going. This was clearly going to be a problem for them for keeping the service going, had they not managed to resolve it. They have done.

We have seen the product. It is well understood and has been well tested, so we are very confident it will work. We are not being complacent about it, and we are going to want to look at the roll-out. If there are any signs of a slipping, we would want to understand what the plans are to keep the existing one going for a little longer, but March 2020 was a contractual deadline between Motorola and Vodafone for the previous service. It is not going to fail to work at that period; it was a point at which they were planning to withdraw the service. We would expect if necessary to be able to keep it going for a bit longer until they are ready.

Q59 **Shabana Mahmood:** How will you make sure? The relationship is between Vodafone and Motorola. You obviously have no standing in that relationship. If there is a risk of the two falling out, what would you do then?

Stephen Webb: It is going to be part of our ongoing relationship with Motorola as the key supplier for the Airwave solution. We want to keep a very close eye on this and get regular reports on the progress of the new build.

Joanna Davinson: We have a set of assurance processes around the existing Airwave contract, as well as around the relationship we have with Motorola for ESMCP, so it will fall within those assurance processes that we



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already have. Yes, it is a relationship between Vodafone and MSI, but we have access to questioning them about their progress in delivering.

- Q60 **Chair:** What about the equipment that the forces out there need? You have Airwave equipment that is becoming obsolete and possibly just breaking down, with not enough new handsets to supply people. What assurances have you got that out there our emergency services will have the kit they need while this patch process continues?

Stephen Webb: We have been having some discussions with senior police users recently about that. A load of work has been done to map—what they call a fleet map—the collection of the devices that there are at the moment, what state they are in and to what extent there may be extra ones around. There was a lot of over-purchasing of devices in the early days of the Airwave contract, so there may well be quite a lot that have not been used very much and could be potentially recycled. We are working closely with them.

- Q61 **Chair:** It's quite a labour-intensive exercise. You are basically getting chief constables to get someone to root around in their store cupboards to see what they have got and then report back to you. Then what? You reallocate it if someone is short?

Stephen Webb: No. They belong to them. It is an exercise that the police are going to be doing collectively, but we will be supporting them. We don't yet know what the scale of the issue is. There are a lot of devices out there. They will obviously start failing, but you could potentially buy more.

- Q62 **Chair:** If you have to buy more, who is going to pay for that? Is it the forces or will it be the Home Office?

Stephen Webb: The way the financial model works is that that would fall to local forces. There are core costs that we hold centrally and local costs that are held locally. They would continue to buy Airwave devices, or at some point they will be buying ESN devices, which have now arrived. The ESN device is starting through testing now and should be ready in a few weeks' time. Clearly, because of the delay, the point at which they need to start buying those has slipped a little. You wouldn't want them to buy a device that would last for six, seven or eight years, unless it is absolutely necessary, which is why we think this exercise of mapping what is out there to see if there could be sharing and things could be transferred would be much better.

- Q63 **Shabana Mahmood:** With respect, Mr Webb, it hasn't slipped a little. It has slipped a lot and then it has slipped a lot again, so let's not downplay the level of slippage here. That is one of the frustrations that this Committee has had from the start on this project. My advice is, don't do that—it is not a good look. You have left forces in an impossible position for planning. It is down to local forces to find the money and work out whether they should buy some kit now, which might be out of date very soon, so they will have to pay out for a new bit of kit instead. I have police stations closing in my constituency. The idea that they can't plan for what little is left of their budgets to work out what equipment they



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need— You have left them in a very difficult position, haven't you, Mr Webb?

Stephen Webb: I accept that planning is difficult for them. I completely understand that.

Q64 **Shabana Mahmood:** You accept it, but what, as the Home Office, will you do about it?

Stephen Webb: We are working with them to see what we can do to minimise the risk that they will have to go and buy more stuff. If there are actual devices out there that could move from forces that have plenty to ones that have less, that would clearly be the best way to do it.

Q65 **Shabana Mahmood:** As you don't know for certain when everything will be ruled out, it is rather a conversation for the sake of saying there is a conversation, but with no actual, measurable outcome at the end of it.

Joanna Davinson: We are conducting a comprehensive re-planning exercise. The aim of that is to create more certainty. We are not there yet, but we absolutely need to do that; we recognise that we have to get that certainty around planning.

Shabana Mahmood: We will come on to the re-planning exercise. Let us have a look at the letter from Sir Philip.

Chair: The permanent secretary.

Q66 **Shabana Mahmood:** The permanent secretary. We have the announcement of this contingency issue being sorted, and then we have seven examples of progress that have been made since the permanent secretary was last in front of the Committee. It is very difficult to measure what those examples of progress mean, other than to tell us good things are happening.

If you have the letter in front of you, can you maybe tell us how far off the timescales some of these actually are? Which of these are successes based on the original timetable? What is just progress that we are really glad has finally happened? Could you disseminate some of that information more clearly for us?

Stephen Webb: Yes, absolutely. I think it is fair to say that all these things are very much what we were hoping for when we were before you last. These are all things that are on track since last November. In the case of the devices, that has probably been slightly quicker than we were hoping.

Q67 **Shabana Mahmood:** I'm less interested in what has happened since the November hearing. How far are they off the original plan for the delivery of this project?

Stephen Webb: There was an original plan that was then moved nine months to the right with the CL110.

Q68 **Shabana Mahmood:** With that slippage baked in.



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Stephen Webb: With that slippage baked in. There is an element of further delay in this, although some of these have been stable for a long time. For example, the software is due to arrive next Wednesday, which is a date that has been stable for six months to a year.

Q69 **Shabana Mahmood:** So this is the performance upgrade on functionality, correct?

Stephen Webb: Yes. Taken in order, the EE coverage is broadly compatible with the revised timescale—the original nine-month-delayed timescale.

Q70 **Shabana Mahmood:** Forgive me, but weren't we supposed to have 97% coverage by now?

Stephen Webb: 97% coverage would be the full EE coverage plus the extended area service. On the EE side, there are problems in some of the specialist areas—they are slipping a little bit—but the masts in their general remote areas have proceeded reasonably well, hence that 292 figure.

Q71 **Chair:** For specialist areas, are you talking about underground and air to ground?

Stephen Webb: They have a series of what they call annexe E sites. It is particularly things like the various metros outside London. Some of those have proven quite complicated, and more work is being done. The actual sites out in the countryside that EE are building have progressed reasonably well.

The extended area services, which are the ones we are building, will be slightly behind what would have been necessary to deliver the original CL110 timescale, if you like. That was to be done by mid-June, but we are now talking more like the end of 2018 to finish those sites.

Q72 **Shabana Mahmood:** Are those the sites for which you got state aid approval?

Stephen Webb: Yes. Those are what I would call the super remote areas, which will never be covered by EE. We are creating a block of sites that we are building ourselves.

Q73 **Shabana Mahmood:** On that state aid point, we have had evidence to the Committee from Vodafone, who are not massively happy about the way that access to those sites is being funded by the taxpayer, for which state aid approval has been obtained. They feel they are not getting a fair deal. What do you say in response to that?

Stephen Webb: I literally received a letter from Vodafone yesterday.

Q74 **Shabana Mahmood:** The content can't have come as too much of a shock to you, surely?

Stephen Webb: We have been having ongoing discussions and we will need to take our own legal advice on that. They obviously have their own



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interpretation of state aid. We believe that EE are very well aware of their state aid obligations, as are we. These sites have been made known to all the other mobile operators, and so far there has been very little interest in it, but I recognise that different mobile operators have their own views on this.

- Q75 **Shabana Mahmood:** Are you not concerned about Vodafone being a bit unhappy about their access to the sites paid for by taxpayers' money? On the other hand, you need them to sort out the contingency issue to make sure that we do not have a gap in our service coverage. Are you confident that all these relationships are kept in the appropriate place?

Stephen Webb: Yes. There will be many parts of the company pursuing different interests. They have a contract with Motorola to provide the replacement to TDM. This is an issue. There will be—

- Q76 **Shabana Mahmood:** It's not like there is a Chinese wall, though, is there? This is basically the same people around the same table, having the same conversation, basically with you.

Stephen Webb: Yes. This is largely an issue between them and EE about the terms on which they can access the site and the cost of it. Again, I think we understand that fair access on fair terms is how state aid works, but clearly different operators will have different interpretations of what that means. I do not want to go much further, because partly it is a legal issue in which EE are involved, and I will also need to review what we have been sent.

- Q77 **Shabana Mahmood:** Okay, fair enough. To return to the areas of progress, I was interested to note that there were not any admissions of where there has been further slippage on the specifics of what should have been ready and some of the other technical details. Have you discovered any things that have been a failure, or something that was unhappy news, rather than the seven positive pieces of information we were given?

Stephen Webb: Over the last few months there has been quite good progress. Since we saw you last, it has been pretty positive. There are things that remain difficult—I suppose I would particularly say some of the details of how the in-vehicle solutions will work, and obviously we are looking to launch a procurement on the air-to-ground solution. So those are the things that have yet to be finalised.

- Q78 **Chair:** Can I be clear? Sir Philip Rutnam—Philip Rutnam as he was then—the permanent secretary, said he was doing a review, so I guess, Ms Davinson, that is effectively you doing the review of the system.

Joanna Davinson: Yes.

- Q79 **Chair:** We expected that in January, and then it was not going to be in January, and it still has not happened. When will the review be finally published? And, as Ms Mahmood said, what bad things—things that need still to be sorted—have you uncovered so far?



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Joanna Davinson: As you know, the programme is a series of projects. What we are doing in that review is working through each of those projects and really getting underneath the dependencies and the critical path of each of those projects, so that we can build our level of confidence in the integrated project plan. If we look at where we have had problems in the past, it has generally been where we have not had enough detail to sufficiently understand the relationships between the different parts of the programme. We are going through that work now.

In addition, we are looking at alternative approaches to delivery, and specifically at how we can get some capability out in the hands of the users early, so that we can do two things. One is to help build confidence in the users that we are developing real stuff. That gives us an opportunity to get feedback as well, as we are in the process of development. There are some categories of users who could capture some real benefit early: the users who, for example, just want the data component. We are going through some very detailed work on both of those aspects. Of course, we then need to reflect that in a commercial discussion with the suppliers, and in particular around the Airwave extension.

We expect to be able to complete all that work by the summer. I appreciate that that is longer than we had said previously, but one of the things that I brought in with my experience of having run large programmes before is that, in doing these resets, it is really important to bottom out the detail and really understand where those dependencies lie, so that you do not—

Q80 **Chair:** So at that point you will be able to tell us if there are going to be any further delays, and you will be coming to the Committee to talk to us about that.

Joanna Davinson: Yes.

Q81 **Chair:** It seems to me that, with all the changes that have taken place and the promises and reviews that have not yet delivered—that is not necessarily a criticism; I hear what you are saying about the process, which makes some sense—maybe we should ask the National Audit Office to have an overview of the whole programme again, Sir Amyas, if that would be a good idea.

Sir Amyas Morse: I think that would make sense.

Chair: It sounds like the summer is the date for that.

Sir Amyas Morse: Well, if you are going to finish your review by the summer, we will start our work in the autumn. Might I pick up something you just said that was very interesting? Did I hear you say that you thought some people might just want the data? Are you starting to segregate the ideas of voice and data in your thinking?

Joanna Davinson: There are some users who do not currently use the voice system. The example that we pick up on is ambulance: there are some categories of ambulance user that just want access to the data



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solution. In terms of conversations about which categories of users are going to use which parts of the system so that we can understand whether we have the opportunity to create incremental releases, we are going through those conversations with users at the moment. That is one of the things that is taking time to understand.

Sir Amyas Morse: Forgive me for one second; I want to make sure I have understood you right. Are you envisaging that people might use the Airwave system and also carry this new system for data? Is that what you have in mind?

Joanna Davinson: In the particular example I gave you, no. They would be using the data service—the new ESMCP solution.

Stephen Webb: But there would be a period—there was always going to be a period—when they were using both.

Sir Amyas Morse: So there might be people walking around with two sets of kit. That is possible, is it, in your thinking?

Stephen Webb: In the ambulance case, you would be particularly looking at putting data in the vehicles, which enables them to bring the data from the vehicles—the ambulances—and backhaul. It has all sorts of advantages, such as being faster and more resilient and enabling aggregation. All the users want to go on to voice, but some of them have such a pressing need for data that they would be quite keen to take that early.

Q82 **Chair:** Do you expect that to be a test bed, Ms Davinson, for testing flaws and problems?

Joanna Davinson: Yes. Any time we can get users to actually touch and feel the solution gives us the opportunity to get feedback. One of the challenges with our current plan is that we do all the design, development and testing for everything before we can go into user trials and transition. We carry through that process quite a lot of risk that by the time we get into trials, there will be some things that are not quite what the users were expecting. The earlier we can get users to actually use the components of the solution, the better.

Chair: That makes very good sense.

Q83 **Shabana Mahmood:** Returning to the review, re-plan, reset, budget—as you will—you can understand the Committee's frustration that while a review was announced in November at our previous recall session, just under three months on from that we are told, essentially, that the conclusion of that review is that you need a more major review of this project. May I press you on the deadlines and timescales for this now much more wide-ranging review? I have to say that Sir Philip's assurance—"I anticipate concluding this work no later than the summer parliamentary recess period"—does not fill me with a huge amount of confidence.



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Chair: Ms Davinson, you are fairly new to the civil service. We are a bit cynical in this Committee. In civil service terms, "summer" very often means autumn or nearly Christmas. Do you mean the summer?

Joanna Davinson: Yes. We do have a plan for the review, as you would expect.

Q84 **Shabana Mahmood:** What is the date for your summer, then?

Joanna Davinson: It is mid-summer.

Q85 **Shabana Mahmood:** June? July? August?

Joanna Davinson: The end of July is what we are aiming for.

Chair: It is a good job the National Audit Office has agreed to look at this, because we will be in recess.

Shabana Mahmood: Yes, at the end of July the House will have risen, so we will be relying on the National Audit Office to pick this up.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for what was really just a brief recap. We look forward to that review. Clearly, there are emergency services out there that need this, and there is a lot of anxiety about who is going to pay for it. We only scratched the surface today, but this was not meant to be a major hearing. We really wanted to demonstrate to you that we are still interested and watching this very closely. I do not think I need to tell you that failure would be catastrophic, but there is also a cost to the taxpayer of the patching through of the system. We did not get into that today, but we will be looking to the National Audit Office to look into that as part of its inquiry. It is not within my powers to tell the Comptroller and Auditor General what to do, but he has heard our suggestion very firmly and has sat through this session.

Thank you very much for your time. As usual, the transcript will be up on the website in the next couple of days. We are not intending to produce a report on this, but we may well write to the permanent secretary as a result.