



Committee of Public Accounts

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Matthew Rycroft CBE
Permanent Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
Westminster
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16 September 2020

Dear Matthew,

RE: Emergency Services Network

Thank you for the evidence that you, Joanna Davinson and Charu Gorasia provided to my Committee on 10 September 2020 on the Emergency Services Network programme.

This was the tenth time that my Committee has taken evidence on this crucial programme. While we were interested to hear about recent technical developments, we are still concerned about the continuing uncertainty surrounding costs, delivery dates and user engagement, which indicates that the programme is not yet on a sound footing. Our specific concerns are as follows.

The revised business case for the programme is still not finalised and Joanna Davinson told us that this is now expected by March 2021, although it was previously expected in 2019. There is still no definite date when the existing Airwave service will be switched off. You and Ms Davinson told us that you were now seeking to switch off Airwave in 2024 rather than at the end of 2022. The longer Airwave is maintained, the more costs rise.

We were interested to hear about the plans for 5,000 ESN handsets to be in use by emergency services by April 2021, beginning nine months of operational trials. However, we are concerned that the programme will face a major challenge in increasing usage from this level to all emergency services personnel, who will need

more than 270,000 ESN connections according to the 2019 National Audit Office report. The schedule for delivering increased numbers of handsets was not clear in our discussions.

We were also concerned about the additional costs that the emergency services themselves will bear due to the delay in this programme. Many police forces are having to renew their Airwave devices in advance of buying ESN devices, due to the programme delay and the need for them to continue to rely on Airwave in the meantime. Police and crime commissioners have expressed their concerns to us about paying twice for their communications systems. It is unclear how these costs will be met. You told us that you are discussing this as part of the Spending Review and with the other bodies funding the programme, and are reviewing whether individual forces should buy what they need or whether there are alternative procurement approaches.

Given the difficulties that this programme has already encountered, it is unsurprising that the Home Office has not yet overcome the serious concerns that the emergency services have expressed about it. You have previously told us that the emergency services would not need to adopt ESN until it was at least as good as Airwave in all respects. However, you acknowledged in our discussion that there would be a need for all emergency services to adopt ESN and that no single force would be able to keep going with Airwave. You envisaged that there would come a point where you have to turn Airwave off and that would require a 'snowballing effect' of increasing numbers of emergency services being convinced to adopt ESN and convincing others to use it. You told us that you had made good progress on addressing some of the key user concerns about resilience, network coverage and ESN provision in the London Underground.

Unfortunately, we were also disappointed with your unclear and incomplete evidence on crucial aspects of the ESN programme. Within one month, please write to the Committee to clarify:

- the annual cost of extending Airwave further, beyond the currently expected date of December 2022;



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- the annual cost of delay to the ESN programme, including Airwave extension; and
- how many handsets will be available to the emergency services users by the end of the nine-month period of operational trials.

If you are able then please also cover the following points, and if not then please write again as soon as the information becomes available:

- whether additional funds will be made available to the emergency services under the Spending Review, because of the need to renew Airwave as well as taking up ESN;
- what you now expect the total cost of the ESN programme to be, based on the business case which you expect to finalise in the coming months;
- your revised expectation on when Airwave will be switched off; and
- how the revised business case will change the Net Present Value of the ESN programme and the point at which benefits will outweigh costs.

My Committee will continue to take a close interest in the ESN programme.

I am copying this letter to the Comptroller and Auditor General and to the Treasury Officer of Accounts.

Yours sincerely,

MEG HILLIER MP

CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS