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9 June 2026

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP
Chair, Committee of Public Accounts
House of Commons
London
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Dear Sir Geoffrey,

I enclose an Independent Assurance Panel report on the Emergency Services Network, which will replace Airwave for the emergency services. It was commissioned in response to a July 2023 Public Accounts Committee recommendation for an independent assessment of ESN progress and risks.

The Panel reviewed the User and Mobile Services contracts awarded in late 2024 before HM Treasury considered the Programme Business Case in February 2026. It notes good procurement progress for the Programme, but highlights risks in integration, testing, transition and the future operating model.

The Programme has since secured NISTA, InvestCo and HM Treasury approval, with HM Treasury approval confirmed on 1 May 2026.

I enclose a copy of the report for your records.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gareth Davies'.

GARETH DAVIES
PERMANENT SECRETARY

1. Context

1.1 The Program has completed the re-procurement of lot 2 (User Services), and the extension of lot 3 (Mobile Services). Contract scope and pricing have been factored into the latest business case, which was approved by the HO Investment Committee in November. Delivery progress was reviewed by an external Gate Zero team (also in November). HMT's TAP review is scheduled for 11 February 2026. The Independent Assurance Panel's comments are as follows.

2. Summary

2.1 Assurance comments are made with reference to the following aspects of the program:

- Construction & completion of technology
- Testing & User Acceptance
- Transition

2.2 Program leadership (SRO & PD), remains of the highest calibre, reflected in a motivated and well qualified Leadership Team, with excellent cross program communications.

2.3 The program is still heavily engaged in the Construction & Completion of the technology phase. At the end of 2024, IBM were appointed as the lot 2 (User Services) provider. This was in parallel to extending and adjusting the lot 3 contract (Mobile Services) with EE. Additionally, a new program delivery partner CGI was appointed to replace Deloitte. In 2025 therefore, the principal focus has been the mobilisation of IBM, the integration of EE's obligations, and the bedding in of the new delivery partner. This has occurred alongside other areas of the program that the Home Office (HO) are responsible for, which continue to progress and remain on track. It is difficult to underestimate the herculean efforts that this has required, not least the navigation of government contracting processes.

The immediate objective for the program is the release of 'First Data' followed by 'First Voice'. If successful, this will demonstrate the 'first drop' of Samsung's Push-To Talk' app, running over the upper core (IBM) and lower core (EE) elements of the ESN.

2.4 The Gate Zero review (November 2025) provided an accurate assessment of program status, noting the various challenges ahead, and making some very important recommendations. The IAP comments below reinforce a number of these. In particular:

- Alignment of Commercial & Program leadership
- Contract Management
- Resourcing & Expertise
- Systems Integration
- Integrated Program Plan

- Testing & Transition
- Future operating model

3. Specifics

3.1 Alignment of Commercial & Program leadership

The Gate Zero review noted that this was an area requiring specific attention. Government and Public procurement processes are quite rigid, and candidly not well suited to programs of this type. The process for re-tendering lot 2 and extending lot 3 required separation of HO resources, not only between lots 2 and 3, but also between individual 'silos' within procurement lots. Consequently, when the resulting specifications and contracts were published, there were areas of non-alignment between supplier specifications, not least a 12 month difference in timescales.

Ironing out 'the wrinkles', whilst also starting delivery has been quite challenging. The need for contract alignment was anticipated and the plan was to complete this no later than 5 months after contract awards, i.e. ED +5. However, the scale of required alignment has necessitated a further 6 months of effort, i.e. ED +1. This has required significant resource to review and manage supplier change controls.

Commercial teams are of course well versed in handling supplier requests for change and price. A primary objective is to ensure that the evidence in support of each change request is correct, and any associated cost is reasonable - not least because suppliers are also well versed in claiming change and price adjustment to maximise returns and mitigate risk.

The challenge for the ESMCP, is that the scale of Change Request activity being experienced was inevitable (as a result of the procurement and assessment process), and also genuine. The danger, is that in seeing their role as 'pushing back', the Commercial Function fracture the integrity of specifications, and damage supplier relationships. The Gate Zero team noted this, and recommended some specific actions, see 3.2 below.

3.2 Contract Management

One of the most effective mechanisms for managing complex programmes with many interrelated parts, is the construction and use of a 'Contract Handbook'. It is also a firm recommendation of the Gate Zero review. Success requires a well written and accurate document that coherently describes supplier and HO obligations, that can then be used as the 'touch stone' for supplier monitoring and where necessary the management of change.

A common challenge in producing a Contract Handbook, is that without experienced resource it is a difficult task. The important point, is that a Contract Handbook is not the same as the 'Contract'. It is written in a completely different style, and is easy to navigate. Once completed, there is then a requirement to train individuals on content, when and how to use.

In early 2024, (in order for the IAP to undertake assurance of intended specifications), 2 specification handbooks were produced by the IAP which allowed 'at a glance' scrutiny of proposed specifications and obligations, schedule by schedule. These documents allowed the IAP and Deloitte (the delivery partner), to spot inconsistencies or gaps in proposed specifications. They were not as effective as they might have been, because of commercial restrictions on cross lot, and within lot activity during procurement.

CGI, have copies of these, and they should be very useful as starting point when drafting a Contract Handbook.

3.3 Resource & Expertise

The design of the Program (2016), resulted in the Home Office being accountable for the delivery of many 'related projects', including aspects of coverage and communication equipment. All of the projects are complex and require deep technical experience. This has been acquired over time, and often required non-Civil Service resource. In the current environment of cost reduction, there is laser focus on reduction of resource overall, and the elimination of contractors in favour of Civil Servants.

ESMCP is a program that might well have been structured in such a way that it did not sit inside the Home Office or Whitehall, and therefore not under pressure to reduce or replace expertise. Again as pointed out in the Gate Zero review, there are significant vacancies (c.60), which need to be addressed through recruiting the right people.

3.4 Systems Integration & Service Integration

SI (System and Service) has been a challenge ever since the programme commenced delivery in 2016. Originally, issues resulted from contract specifications being ambiguous or silent on individual components of Systems and Service Integration.

There is no doubt that the current contract specifications have addressed this. IBM have a major role in both areas, and are required to integrate across lots and related projects. Although the authors of specifications understood their intention, the procurement process (described above) resulted in the depth and scope of requirements in this area being one of the areas of change dialogue. Production of a Contract Handbook, training and executing integration tasks as early as possible will help reinforce intention.

3.5 Integrated Program Plan

The Gate Zero review highlighted the work that remained to publish a final Integrated Program Plan, in part due to ongoing supplier dialogue and change management. The quality of plans when produced is invariably comprehensive and meaningful. Getting the final IPP published will provide greater confidence in

the user organisations, and as a result, allow alignment of funding and user resource, as the program enters the testing and transition phase.

3.6 Transition

Understandably, the concentration and focus of the program has been on constructing and completing the technical infrastructure of ESN components. With IBM and other industry subcontractors now 'in play', the release of 'First Data' & 'First Voice' followed by 'Final Data' & 'Final Voice' will occur during 2027 and 2028.

Mass transition onto the ESN is scheduled for Q2 2028 – Q3 2029, with Airwave shutdown planned for Q4 2029. The SRO and PD recognise the importance of starting to reflect transition activity in both resource and workstreams. It is important to start this, and to navigate resource and expertise pressures from above.

3.7 Future Operating Model

This is a question that has existed since the program's inception. Running a live service from within a Home Office department has been recognised as 'probably not the right answer', requiring instead consideration of other alternatives. In the interests of technology delivery, and to avoid distraction, addressing the future operating model until now not been a priority.

In common with remarks above about Transition, the time is now right to discuss and settle on the future model.