FiReControl – Principles for FRS officer mobilisation

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The Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority
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The Clerk to the Fire and Rescue Authority
The Clerk to the Combined Fire and Rescue Authority
The Commissioner of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority
The Chief Fire Officer

Summary
This circular provides further clarification of the principles for mobilisation of FRS officers by the regional control centres being delivered by the FiReControl project. FRSs should take these principles into account when determining their requirements from the Firelink project for radios for their officers. It also sets out proposals for the provision of mobile data capabilities for FRS officers, which will be taken forward through the transition plan for the FiReControl project.

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1.0 **Overview**

1.1 In 2006, the FiReControl project, in conjunction with CFOA, developed a Concept of Operations for Regional Control Centres. At that time, the concept of operation for FRS officer mobilisation was still developing. This circular provides details of the mobilisation principles for FRS officers, and the communications to support mobilisation.

2.0 **Mobilisation principles for FRS officers**

2.1 FRS officers who are available for duties associated with emergency response or who are nominated as a Fire and Rescue Service contact point for Regional Control Centres (RCCs) must be contactable at all times during their period of availability.

2.2 The primary means of mobilising officers will be via data messages, with voice used as a secondary or fallback method. The RCC will maintain knowledge of the location and status of officers, consistent with the principle of mobilising the nearest available appropriate resource. Location and status should be reported via data messages, with location being reported automatically at intervals.

2.3 The following are the key principles for the working relationship between officers who are available for duties associated with emergency response or who are nominated as a Fire and Rescue Service contact point and the Regional Control Centres:

- Officer availability and contact methods will be provided by FRSs to the RCC.
- Officers will be contacted or mobilised by the notified method of contact. Mobilisation and other messages will as far as possible be sent as data messages rather than voice.
- Officers will inform the RCC of any unplanned changes to their availability, or if they need to change the method of contact for future messages.

3.0 **Resilient communications provision**

3.1 FRS officers must have a resilient means of communication available to them, i.e. there must be a high level of assurance that the means of communications will be available in all circumstances in which FRS officers are likely to be mobilised and operate.

3.2 The Department’s recommendation, which is strongly endorsed by the FiReControl Senior Operational Group, is that FRS officers should where possible use communications based on Firelink. This offers a resilient bearer with coverage designed to meet FRS needs. Both mobile (“SAN A”) and handheld (“SAN C”) radio terminals are available, with capabilities for voice and short data messaging. These terminals also meet the requirement for automatic location reporting, which is a key part of the Concept of Operation for RCCs.
3.3 The choice of mobile or handheld terminals will rest with each FRS, who should take into account issues such as local working practices, arrangements for officer vehicle provision, and health & safety issues. FRSs should also consider, as now, whether to provide additional means of communication or alerting (for example pagers), particularly for use outside vehicles.

4.0 Provision of mobile data capabilities

4.1 In the light of the growing use of handheld devices by FRS officers, the Department has investigated whether FRS officers can be provided with a Handheld Data Terminal which is compatible with the mobilising systems being delivered by the FiReControl project. Having examined various options in conjunction with the FiReControl Senior Operational Group, the Department has concluded that the most viable and cost-effective option for a handheld device would be a commercial “smartphone”, combining mobile telephone and mobile data capabilities in one device.

4.2 The device would offer a better user interface for data messaging than a Firelink terminal, and would provide other functionality. Note that the device would be reliant on commercial data bearer networks rather than Firelink, and so should not be considered to be a substitute for a Firelink radio in terms of coverage and resilience. Nor will it offer the press-to-talk / group voice capabilities that Firelink offers. The data capabilities of a handheld unit are necessarily limited by the size of the device, so at the scene of an incident officers would be expected to use the mobile data capabilities available at the scene on the mobile data terminal (SAN E) installed in an appliance or incident control unit.

4.3 Working with the Office of Government Commerce, the Department will lead the procurement of the smartphone hardware, with a view to establishing a framework arrangement for supply of appropriate devices and accessories (for example, for hands-free operation). The devices on the framework will be regularly refreshed to maintain currency with the market. The Department will also engage with the major network providers to attempt to secure more resilient network features (such as roaming between different networks).

4.4 The Department, through the FiReControl project, will provide a standard set of mobile data software to run on the devices via its contract with EADS. The initial capital costs of the smartphone devices will be funded by the FiReControl project. FRSs will be responsible for funding running costs (such as the airtime agreement and associated usage charges) and for additional or replacement devices. FRSs will also be responsible for considering any vehicle compatibility and health and safety issues.

4.5 To inform its procurement, the Department would welcome an indication from each FRS as to whether they would be interested in using the smartphone devices, and if so the likely numbers of devices required. This will be taken forward as a task in the FiReControl transition plan.

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