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## **Cutting through the smoke and mirrors of the Emergency Service Network**

Reliable and effective communications are a hugely important requirement of the emergency services. They are vital to the effective operation and safety of police, fire and emergency ambulance crews who every day face life or death situations and decision making. When I attended a recent Cheshire Police Management Board meeting I was alerted to a very significant issue which by and large has been under the radar of Police and Crime Panels (PCP), that of the Airwave replacement, The Emergency Service Network (ESN). It was stated at that meeting that effectively the Cheshire Council Tax payer is subsidising a failing Home Office project and that current Police communications equipment is becoming in effect “not fit for purpose and only surviving with sticking plaster”.

Picking up my phone I contacted several colleagues on PCP around the country and asked how they were addressing this issue? Most had no knowledge of the project and felt that this was an operational policing issue. However having signed off the letter agreeing the Cheshire police precept for 2020-21 earlier in the year I would beg to differ. This is a financial issue and one that, as has been pointed out in Cheshire, the council tax payer not just here but around the Country is subsidising. Therefore PCP have a legitimate role and responsibility to evidence that Commissioners are ensuring their police forces are managing the risk and being transparent about the cost of the unacceptable overrun of this Home Office project.

ESN is an unproven large scale and critical project which affects all parts of our emergency services. ESN has been in the planning stage for over 10 years and barely moved beyond that phase. In the interim the Airwave service continues to generate very significant revenues to the main contractor Motorola of a staggering £620 million a year until 2022.

Sir Mark Sedwill who was Head of the Civil Service and National Security Advisor who recently resigned prematurely, when questioned on ESN and his role as the projects Accountable Officer by the Public Accounts Committee on 1 April 2019 he said: “Because of the structure of the PFI contract that Airwave (Motorola) had..at the end of the PFI contract (they would) have been in a position to charge us anything they wished”.

When questioned by the Home Affairs Select Committee on 23 October 2019 Sir Philip Rutnam the then Permanent Secretary to the Home Office when asked a question specifically of the ESN project: How ungently do you treat this issue?’ “Of all our major projects and we have a large number this (ESN) is the most important for me as Permanent Secretary, this is the largest in value. It is a fundamental part of our national infrastructure. It remains a challenging and complex project. Sat next to him was a very uncomfortable looking and recently appointed Home Secretary Priti Patel who when asked: “What is your assessment of ESN” said: “ Work in progress and we need to make sure we are able to deliver something that has been eagerly anticipated and long awaited. In February 2020 Sir Philip Rutnam resigned.

In July 2019 a Select Committee highlighted that the ESN project was expected to cost the public £ 3.1 billion more than planned. They also stated that: “The Home Office announced it was to ‘reset’ the programme, but we are not yet convinced that it has done enough to turn the programme around”.

The figures are staggering the projected overrun costs of £3.1billion which are seldom correct and become larger, amounts to £50.00 for every man women and child in the UK. In May 2019 the National Audit Office reported “In total the project (ESN) is expected to cost £9.3 billion to 2037, up 49% from the original figure given by the Home Office in its 2015 business case.

More damning for the Home Office is that the Select Committee of in July 2019 went on the record saying: “The endless delay in delivering a new system for our emergency services to communicate and share data is creating a crisis of confidence as police, fire and ambulance no longer have trust in the new system being delivered. Neither the emergency services, nor the Public Accounts Committee, are convinced that the Home Office has a credible plan to deliver a reliable and effective service anytime soon”.

In an acerbic summing up of the Select Committee hearing the Chair stated; “The key technology behind the ESN is not yet fully proven and we were not convinced that the Home Office has the capability and plans to deliver a coherent single system that provides the functionality and dependability the emergency services demand.”

So where does this leave us at a local level? Police Commissioners have the role of oversight and governance and proposing the annual police precept which finances police forces. Police and Crime Panels have the statutory role of oversight and governance of Commissioners and agreeing the annual police precept. Not to challenge and support Commissioners in managing the risks associated with ESN and the potential impact on the local council tax payers would be an abrogation of responsibility.

As one seasoned colleague said to me of ESN: “The Governments apparent strategy in dealing with mitigating expectations with this failing project is one of creating overall fatigue”.

### **What can and should we do?**

So simply through the National Association of Police, Fire and Crime Panels who’s role is to challenge and support Commissioners, I want all panels to ask some simple questions which we here in Cheshire have put to our Commissioner:

- What are the expected features and benefits of ESN over Airwave?
- What is the cost of maintaining the police elements of Airwave?
- What are the costs incurred to date and what is the projected costs up to ESN implementation?

- Does the PCC expect to realise the expected cost benefits originally projected for ESN?
- Does the PCC believe the ESN will be fit for purpose and likely to meet its strategic aims?
- What are the expected project risks and associated impact on budgets if these risks are not mitigated?
- If the Airwave contract expires in 2022 and ESN is not fully available, has the PCC plans to accommodate further overspend?
- Can the PCC confirm if Motorola, as has been reported, is involved with ESN which may be viewed as a conflict of interest?

The Emergency Service Network project needs very carefully scrutiny, monitoring and risk management at a local level. Police and Crime Panels need to Support and Challenge Commissioners to ensure total transparency with our communities as to the costs being incurred. The emergency services who have shown and repeatedly demonstrated the highest level of dedication and commitment deserve the very best equipment to operate effectively and safely. Keeping the lid on it and passing a hot potato or putting the telescope to a blind eye is not an option.