

Scottish Executive

Future of fire service control rooms in Scotland

Northgate Information Solutions' response

August 2004

General comments

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the consultation on the future of fire service control rooms in Scotland. It is an important step in facilitating the fundamental change required to enable the fire service to respond to the challenges of the twenty first century.
2. It is clear that Scotland's fire services would benefit from control room rationalisation, and that joint control rooms have the potential to radically improve services to the public.
3. The benefits of joint control rooms include: enhancing information sharing between fire and rescue services; co-ordinating services to provide a genuinely national system for Scotland; ensuring that the service is capable of responding to major incidents. The two fire control room option provides Scotland with the most practical and cost effective solution.
4. We propose that subsidiarity be the principle upon which practice is judged. Local knowledge and information is critical to responding quickly and appropriately to emergencies. So too is local deployment of resources backed up by effective risk strategies. Where incidents occur on too large a scale, or require specialist resources beyond the capability of local service, it is crucial that there are regional and national policies and plans to tackle such events.
5. It is essential that the processes and procedures used in Scotland are appropriate to meet the particular challenges of operating in Scotland. These include the fact that Scotland has a large land mass of remote rural areas.
6. Care must be taken to ensure that control room operators have a comprehensive understanding of risk assessment practices in emergency call handling and the principles of integrated risk management.
7. Systems must be established to ensure that any difficulties in liaising with ambulance trusts and police as a result of joint control rooms are identified and corrective measures applied.
8. The systems put in place for the control room in Scotland should be capable of interfacing with those systems established in England and Wales. This will require collaboration but not uniformity in establishing control rooms in Scotland and England/Wales.

Northgate and community justice

9. As a leading provider of technology services and enforcement systems to the police, local authorities and fire and rescue services, our particular interest is on citizen-based services and community justice.
10. For Northgate, community justice encompasses rights and responsibilities; help and punishment; and entitlements and enforcement. A safe and secure community promotes social cohesion, economic progress and environmental improvement as the guarantors of sustainable success.
11. Community safety is an essential part of community justice. The public needs and has the right to expect fire and rescue services that meet the growing challenges of: terrorism and major incidents; of refocusing activities on prevention through effective risk management strategies; and of targeting resources to meet that risk.
12. Northgate believes that a citizen-centred approach to preventing fire must focus on local delivery. This needs to draw upon the best resources available and achieve the correct balance of these whether they are local, regional or national.
13. Effective delivery requires careful balancing of national and local priorities and clear and transparent accountability between national government and local services.

Coping with change

Resilience

14. Northgate welcomes the commitment to resilience and the New Dimensions. It is essential for public safety that our fire and rescue services are geared up to providing a sustained response to unprecedented and unanticipated occurrences.
15. Our concern is that there must be clear procedures and clear responsibilities between local, regional and national bodies. There must also be national leadership focused on providing the mechanisms for inter-agency working based on the principle of collaboration.
16. Collaboration is an essential part of encouraging innovation at both a national and local level. At its best, collaboration encourages an open learning environment where people can experiment, learn from experience and share information to help drive through continuous improvement to add to the public value.

17. Collaboration should be based on recognition of what works well, and what needs changing. There is a need to build and share best practice, as well as identify and solve problems relating to national and local issues.
18. Preventing fires and other incidents and promoting community safety should not be left to fire and rescue services alone. A collaborative approach involving a range of public authorities, businesses and voluntary organisations is vital. By sharing expertise, knowledge and resources with a range of partners, the fire and rescue service can develop a holistic prevention strategy based on the effective management of risk.

Scottish legislation

19. Northgate welcomes the Scottish executive proposals for new legislation. In particular, the proposal for fire brigades to produce Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) and the establishment of a Common Fire Services Agency. These developments will assist in the modernisation of the fire and rescue service in Scotland - delivering a service centred on prevention rather than cure and able to respond effectively to the full range of emergency incidents.
20. Most fires are preventable. IRMPs are critical in enabling effective prevention strategies at a local level. They are already identifying opportunities for fundamental change in the provision of fire and rescue services.

Number of control rooms in Scotland

Providing one control room

21. The consultation document outlines the fact that the option of one control room is the most cost effective option. This would help to provide a UK-wide approach to fire and rescue services.
22. However, the report also outlines some considerable difficulties in establishing one control room, suggesting that it does not provide the optimum solution for Scotland at the current time. These include the scale of the project which, in reality, would become a UK-wide solution rather than a Scottish one.
23. Scotland would need to negotiate with England and Wales over the possible development and cost sharing of common systems, and all parties would need to be persuaded of the importance of recognising the different conditions in Scotland. Whilst common processes and procedures could lead to a greater sharing of best practice between Scotland and England and Wales, this is not contingent upon having one control room. It is almost certain that because of the scale of the project, this will result in greater implementation delays compared with the other options.

Providing two control rooms

24. Northgate believes that the Mott MacDonald report identifies that most practical and cost effective option to meet the challenges faced by the Fire Service in Scotland today: the proposal to provide two control rooms.
25. Although the net present value (NPV) of one control room is £20.2 million, this figure does not account for any uncertainties or the need to be flexible to respond to changing conditions after the project decision. Because of the larger scale of the proposed project, these uncertainties are likely to be greater than the two fire controls rooms option whose NPV lies between £15.2 million and £13.4 million.
26. The two fire control rooms option has some considerable advantages. It would provide a genuinely national solution for Scotland, with the fire control rooms capable of providing back-up to each other. It would also maintain the possibility, as is taking place through the IRMP process, of developing shared systems with the ambulance service.

Overcoming barriers

27. Northgate believes that leadership is critical to the successful implementation of any project. It supports the development of a national strategy to identify where the control rooms should be located; how the controls will be managed; the implications for control room staff; how the strategy will be implemented on a practical level and the on-going operations of the control rooms.
28. Our experience in working with public authorities is that the Prince Methodology proposed by Mott MacDonald provides a framework for ensuring effective project management and allowing partners and stakeholders to work in a collaborative fashion.
29. There is clearly a need to ensure that the work on control rooms is co-ordinated with other modernisation initiatives and other projects such as Firelink. The project should outline the need for such collaboration at the Project Initiation stage.

Preparing staff

30. There are few who would deny that we need a fire service fit for the twenty first century. One that meets the growing challenges of global terrorism whilst meeting citizens' daily needs. In today's world, the emergency services must work closely together and develop joint strategies for tackling cross-cutting issues. This requires changes in working practices and methods that may be assisted by new technology to deliver safer communities.

31. New technology can assist in effective performance management as long as individuals and organisations are adequately prepared for change and there is a clear focus on local priorities and judgements about different types of risk.
32. In many cases IT projects are delivered well but overall programmes are often delivered badly. Too little consideration is given to the joining up of systems and the impact of new working methods on communication – to employees, to public service users or the general public. If new technology provides citizen-friendly services which are highly accessible, it is likely that satisfaction will increase and demand may be raised. Only if the relevant change management strategies have been put in place can technology really add value.
33. Prior to new services being introduced, staff need to be prepared, the impact on service development analysed and planned and pre-emptive measures put in place to deal with any new demand. This is particularly important in relation to service development and is critical to achieving a smooth transition to a new control room system.

Integrated risk management plans

34. If we are to prevent fires and raise standards we need to ensure that centrally held information and analysis can effectively enable local corrective action. Critical to the success of such systems is that there is strong and robust local input and involvement, not only in collecting data but in defining and constantly refining central information and analysis. The control rooms could play a vital role in implementing risk management techniques.
35. Authorities should develop their own risk assessment weighting systems that prioritise incidents according to risk categories such as potential loss of life and the impact on the economy, environment and property. In most instances, this can best be achieved at a local level since the majority of risk factors are locally derived and local citizens are best placed to direct such judgements.
36. Control rooms will need to be fully involved in implementing integrated risk management processes if the fire service as a whole is to ensure that resources are deployed on the basis of risk assessment rather than responding to calls on a pre-determined basis.
37. Robust data collection should enable effective decisions about risk to be taken based on the highest confidence in the accuracy and consistency of underlying information. It is crucial to ensure that processes are established to sustain accurate data collection on an ongoing basis.

Procurement

38. It is clear that if the project is to move ahead at a timely pace, the time for selection and procurement of products should be kept to a minimum whilst ensuring fair and open competition. The project would benefit from developing a national procurement process in the same way as the Scottish Executive is funding Firelink.
39. Whilst there is a clear need to develop economies of scale, which regionalism amongst other things provides, it is crucial that clear responsibilities, procedures and information management systems are devised which are based on the principle of subsidiarity.
40. This is crucial in all areas, but particularly in securing effective risk management programmes, which must be based on the efficient management of local information, identification of risk and policy decisions based on local factors. It is critical that regional controls or decision making do not override local policy decisions of this nature. Clear lines of responsibility must be backed up by integrated information systems to ensure that local flexibility can operate seamlessly alongside regional control, delivering the best use of resources for any incident.

Developing a UK-wide approach

41. Whilst there are disadvantages with one fire control room, we recommend that the any project should not rule out a UK-wide approach for the fire services which relies on co-operation, collaboration, shared information and best practice.
42. There would be clear advantages if the Scottish control rooms that are put in place were capable of interfacing with those systems established in England and Wales. This will require collaboration but not necessarily uniformity in establishing the control rooms in Scotland and England and Wales.
43. It is critical, therefore, that solid foundations and process maps are developed early in the programme to provide a stable, scalable and resilient platform for the incremental development of a UK solution.

About Northgate

Northgate is a technology services company with a difference. It is committed to high quality public services and understands the public sector. That knowledge is core to its business.

Northgate's task is to enhance public sector value through intelligent use of people and information technology systems and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate assists the fire and rescue, local authorities and the police to promote community well-being by helping them provide citizens with accessible and responsive one-stop services based on clear and detailed information.

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