



## Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority

### Decision Report

**Report reference number:** 035-25

**Government security classification:** Official

**Title of report:** ECFRS FireLink Contract Renewal

**Area of county / stakeholders affected:** ECFRS Control, Operations, ICT

**Report by:** Sarah Taylor, Assistant Director – Digital, Data & Technology

**Date of report:** 15 July 2025

**Enquiries to:** Karl Edwards, Director of Assets and Digital Infrastructure

#### 1. Purpose of the report

The purpose of the report is to seek approval for payment of the service fees for the financial year 2025-26, as the service's proportion of the costs due in the contract between the Home Office and Airwave for radio communications.

#### 2. Recommendations

This report makes and provides supporting information for the following recommendations:

- That the purchase order for continuing payment of the service fees for the financial year 2025-26, to the value of **£515,107** is approved by the PFCC.
- That the PFCC provides authorisation for the Chief Financial Officer to raise this purchase order on their behalf.

- That the PFCC notes a letter from the Home Office on 13 February 2025 (attached at Appendix B) confirms that the Firelink S31 grant will be stopped in 2025/26. This is one year earlier than expected, and the Authority had budgeted to receive £122,242 in 2025/26.

### **3. Benefits of the proposal**

The benefits of the proposal are that it will allow ECFRS to continue to discharge its statutory duties, by continuing to mobilise and support mission critical voice and data communications between Control, appliances, officers and all other emergency services over the current Airwave network.

### **4. Background and proposal**

The Firelink Project Agreement - to provide a new digital emergency services communication network - was originally commissioned and approved by what was then the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in 2006. The project implemented the Airwave network and service, which was borne out of the need for all emergency services in Great Britain to have access to a secure and reliable communications network with unrivalled coverage across the length and breadth of the country.

The original contract ran until the end of December 2016. DCLG then approved a major extension of the Firelink Project Agreement for a further 36 months until the end of 2019, but this was further extended by the Home Office in 2018, due to delays in the Home Office led Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP), which was commissioned to replace the Airwave network with a new 4G LTE Emergency Services Network (ESN). As a result, the core Firelink contract between the Home Office and Airwave remained in place and unchanged, with a revised target date at that point for the national shutdown of the Airwave network of 31 December 2022.

The Full Business Case for ESMCP was then reviewed and updated by the Home Office in 2020, at which point the best case for the Airwave network shutdown was estimated to be June 2023, although the expected (risk based) shutdown date was estimated to be as late as June 2025.

The ESMCP has been further delayed although, during 2024-25, a full re-procurement was conducted by the Home Office. There remains no definitive date as to when ECFRS will be able to complete the transition to the new ESN. Costs for the provision of radio communications will continue until the point at which we can fully transition to the new ESN and decommission all Airwave devices and connectivity to the Airwave network. The costs of service will continue to be allocated to us by the Home Office. ESN implementation is unlikely to commence in FY 2025/26.

The Home Office wrote to Fire and Rescue Services on 7 March 2025 (please see Appendix A) in relation to Airwave charges. They confirmed that the Competition Appeal Tribunal (the Tribunal) took the decision in December 2023 to uphold the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA)'s decision to impose a charge control mechanism on Motorola in respect of the revenue Airwave can earn from its charges. Motorola went on to lodge an application for permission to appeal the Tribunal's decision to the Court of Appeal (CoA), however this has been unsuccessful.

As a result, the Home Office, from April 2025 to December 2025, will invoice Fire and Rescue Authorities in England at the reduced rate of 51.34%. It should be noted that discounts applied are a forecast and could change depending on the reconciliation of costs occurring in October 2026.

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service was holding credits on behalf of the sector in relation to this legal claim. Given the latest Motorola claim was unsuccessful, the Home Office has advised

Buckinghamshire to release the credits being held on behalf of the sector. For ECFRS this relates to £667,000 and is reflected in the Home Office Letter included within Appendix A.

## 5. Alternative options considered and rejected

In common with every fire and rescue service in the UK, there are no alternative options to the Airwave network until the full ESN mission critical voice and data capability has been delivered by ESMCP. As stated above, there is currently no definitive date as to when ECFRS will be able to complete the transition.

The only alternative open to the Commissioner is to withdraw from the Airwave service without there being a workable alternative. This would significantly and adversely impact mobilisation and incident communications between Fire Control, responding firefighters and officers, as well as communications with partner agencies and other fire and rescue services.

## 6. Strategic priorities

Fire & Rescue Plan Priority	Impact
Protecting Vulnerable People	Enhancing coordination and response capabilities to better protect vulnerable people
Make Buildings Across Essex Safe	Enabling faster, more reliable communication between fire crews, improving coordination during inspections, emergencies, and enforcement activities.
Improving Road Safety and Reducing Road Deaths	Firelink helps improve road safety and reduce road deaths by providing fire services with fast, reliable communication to coordinate quicker responses to road traffic incidents and support joint operations with other emergency services.
Adapt to our Changing Environment	Enabling resilient, real-time communication during increasingly complex and climate-related emergencies, ensuring ECFRS can respond effectively to evolving risks.
Improve Efficiency and Effectiveness	Firelink enhances efficiency and effectiveness by providing a unified, reliable communication system that streamlines coordination, improves response times, and supports better resource management.
Promote a Positive Culture and Develop the Workforce	Firelink supports the promotion of a positive culture and workforce development by fostering seamless communication, collaboration, and shared situational awareness, which strengthens teamwork, confidence, and operational competence among firefighters.

The proposal also aligns with the following national fire and rescue priorities set by the Home Office:

- Make appropriate provision for fire prevention and protection activities and response to fire and rescue related incidents
- Collaborate with emergency services and other local and national partners to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service they provide

## 7. Operational implications

Continuing payment of service fees for Firelink will have no operational implications. However, as set out in section 5 above, not renewing the contract would effectively withdraw ECFRS from the Airwave service without there being a workable alternative.

## 8. Financial implications

The current Firelink contract is subsidised by the Home Office for all fire and rescue services. The following table denotes the annual Firelink costs along with the annual Section 31 grant received since 2016-17. Both the costs and the annual Section 31 grant are budgeted for each financial year.

Financial Year	Actual Firelink Costs	Annual S31 Firelink Grant	Net Cost to the Authority
2016-17	£772,334	(£569,608)	£202,726
2017-18	£790,970	(£590,193)	£200,777
2018-19	£812,236	(£609,480)	£202,756
2019-20	£837,259	(£628,258)	£209,001
2020-21	£822,815	(£642,268)	£180,547
2021-22	£827,304	(£567,920)	£259,384
2022-23	£907,342	(£488,968)	£418,374
2023-24	£1,016,573	(£366,726)	£649,847
2024-25	£1,060,286	(£293,381)	£766,905
2025-26	£515,107	-	£515,107

The annual Firelink grant has been reducing over the previous four years, with 2025/26 being the final year when the grant was due to be paid, in line with previous Home office communications. The Authority budgeted £122,242 in 2025/26 and, within its Medium-Term Financial Plan, had removed the annual grant by 2026/27.

The Home Office letter dated 13 February 2025 (see Appendix B) announced that the Firelink grant will be stopped in 2025/26, which is one year earlier than expected.

The numbers in the table above do not include the £667,000 credit that is mentioned in Section 4 above.

## 9. Legal implications

Ongoing payment of service fees will have no legal implications.

## 10. Staffing implications

Ongoing payment of service fees will have no staffing implications.

## 11. Equality and Diversity implications

We have considered whether individuals with protected characteristics will be disadvantaged as a consequence of the actions being taken. Due regard has also been given to whether there is impact on each of the following protected groups as defined within the Equality Act 2010:

Race	No	Religion or belief	No
Sex	No	Gender reassignment	No
Age	No	Pregnancy & maternity	No
Disability	No	Marriage and Civil Partnership	No
Sexual orientation	No		

Implications of the Core Code of Ethics have been fully considered in this paper and determined there are none.

## 12. Risks

There are no known risks of continuing to pay service fees for Firelink.

The risk of not proceeding with Firelink is that, as an emergency service, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service would lose resilience measures in mobilising resources to 999 calls, nor would it be able to communicate with the incident ground during an operational incident. Firelink is a system developed by Airwave Solutions and is a private digital network specifically for use by the emergency services. There are no other providers of this network, and it would therefore not be possible to provide the resilience of communications during emergency events. This is nationally recognised through the Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Programme (JESIP).

As Airwave is replaced by ESN in future years, there is financial risk relating to dual running costs. This cannot be quantified at present, and it is unlikely to occur in this financial year. The service continues to actively monitor progression, emerging obligations and forecast costs, and to plan accordingly.

## 13. Governance Boards

This proposal was agreed in principle through the Exec Board on 25 April 2025 before being presented to the PFCC at the Strategic Board on 3 June 2025.


## 14. Background papers

[REDACTED]

**Decision Process**

**Step 1A - Chief Fire Officer Comments**

.....I support the recommendation  
.....

Sign:  ..... Date:.....15/07/25.....

**Step 1B – Consultation with representative bodies**

**Step 2 - Statutory Officer Review**

The report will be reviewed by the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority’s (“the Commissioner’s”) Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer prior to review and sign off by the Commissioner or their Deputy.

Monitoring Officer


Sign:



Print: P. Brent-Isherwood

Date: 15 August 2025

Chief Finance Officer

Sign:.....  .....

Print: .....Neil Cross.....

Date: ..... 15/07/25 .....

**Step 3 - Publication**

**Is the report for publication?      YES**

**If 'NO', please give reasons for non-publication** (Where relevant, cite the security classification of the document(s). State 'none' if applicable)

Subject to redaction, as set out below

If the report is not for publication, the Monitoring Officer will decide if and how the public can be informed of the decision.

**Step 4 - Redaction**

**If the report is for publication, is redaction required:**

- 1      **Of Decision Sheet                      YES**
- 2      **Of Appendix                              YES**

**If 'YES', please provide details of required redaction:**

.....**Appendices to be redacted (highlighted in yellow)**.....

.....

**Date redaction carried out: 15/08/2025**.....

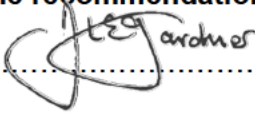
If redaction is required, the Chief Finance Officer or the Monitoring Officer are to sign off that redaction has been completed.

Sign: .....  .....      Print: **Neil Cross** .....

Date signed: **20.08.2025** .....

**Step 5 - Decision by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner or Deputy Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner**

**I agree the recommendations to this report:**

Sign:  ..... (DPFCC)

Print: Jane Gardner.....

Date signed: .....15/08/2025.....

**I do not agree the recommendations to this report because:**

.....  
.....

Sign: ..... (PFCC / DPFCC)

Print: .....

Date signed: .....