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Emergency Services Network: Critical Communications System

Volume 835: debated on Monday 29 January 2024

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Question

🕒 2.56pm

Asked by

Lord Harris of Haringey >

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To ask His Majesty’s Government when they expect the new Emergency Services Network critical communications system to be fully operational; and what is the latest estimate of the cost.

Lord Harris of Haringey >

(Lab)

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My Lords, I beg leave to ask the Question standing in my name on the Order Paper. In so doing, I draw attention to my interests in the register.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Home Office >

(Lord Sharpe of Epsom) (Con)

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My Lords, the Home Office is procuring a new supplier for mobile radio and data services following Motorola’s withdrawal from ESN. This means the expected transition to ESN in 2024 and Airwave shutdown in 2026 cannot now be achieved. A revised business case will be published this year. This will reflect the impact of procurement activity and the charge control imposed by the Competition and Markets Authority on Motorola in 2023.

Lord Harris of Haringey >

(Lab)

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My Lords, this is pretty poor, is it not? The programme was originally announced a decade ago. The switchover was supposed to start in 2017 and be completed by 2019. The original cost was a mere £6.2 billion; the last estimate—and that is two years out of date, before Motorola withdrew—was £11.3 billion. Only one network provider was prepared to bid. The National Audit Office warned that this is a technology

“not yet proven in real-world conditions”.

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least doubled, implementation is at least 14 or 15 years late, and there is no guarantee that the existing Airwave system can continue beyond the year after next—if this debacle is not the fault of his department then whose fault it is and who is taking responsibility?

Lord Sharpe of Epsom >

(Con)

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My Lords, the noble Lord has asked me a large number of questions. **To reassure all noble Lords, there is no reason at all why Airwave cannot be extended beyond 2030.** As for how we got to where we got, it is worth reminding the House that it was the Home Office that referred Motorola to the Competition and Markets Authority in April 2021; that resulted in Motorola leaving the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme in December 2022. My noble friend the Chief Whip answered a Question back in 2022 which mentioned the £11.3 billion figure referred to by the noble Lord. That was for a programme that was supposed to run between 2015-16 and 2036-37. Unfortunately, any estimates that I give now would not be comparable in duration or end date; the end date is now expected to be 2044. However, the CMA charge control imposed on Motorola will involve a saving to the taxpayer. The numbers are very much up in the air.

Lord Addington >

(LD)

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My Lords, can the Minister assure us that the Government will look at the original tendering process to find out exactly why this went wrong, since it clearly has? As an aside, can the Government give us an assurance that no one from Fujitsu or its Horizon programme is let anywhere near it?

Lord Sharpe of Epsom >

(Con)

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My Lords, I suppose this could have been spotted earlier, but the fact is that Motorola’s dual role in it arose as a result of the company acquiring Airwave at the same time as it was awarded the contract for ESN, so the Home Office’s options at that point were limited. We sought to agree measures to protect the delivery of ESN and, when it became clear that those measures were insufficient, the Home Office raised its concerns with the Competition and Markets Authority. As for future suppliers, the contracts will be awarded later this year, and I shall make sure that the noble Lord’s concerns are reflected.

Lord Coaker >

(Lab)

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My Lords, the Government are supposed to be introducing a new emergency services network, but, as my noble friend pointed out, what the Minister has said leaves us all still bewildered about the actual implementation date. Perhaps he can tell us. The original date was 2017, but the implementation date is what everyone wants to know. When is it going to be working? When are we going to know that we have a new emergency services network? From what I could see, **the Home Office stated that it would be 2029.** Is that still correct? In other words, when can we actually have the new emergency services network promised by the Government?

Lord Sharpe of Epsom >

(Con)

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I obviously cannot answer that question as precisely as the noble Lord would like. **Yes, 2029 is an aspiration,** partly because of the functionality of Airwave, to which I have already referred. However, some aspects of ESN are already live. Three ESN products have gone live in the past two years: 4G data connectivity for vehicles, which is called Connect; push-to-talk and messaging capability on

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the EAS, which is blanket coverage across the country, while much of the hardware has already been put in place. The noble Lord draws far too bleak a picture.

Lord Hogan-Howe >
(CB)

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My Lords, I declare an interest, including having carried out a review for the Home Office, part of which the Minister has referred to, which is the recommendation to refer to the monopolies commission. As he explained, Motorola purchased the legacy system and was paid around £250 million, while for the new system that it was about to deliver it would be paid £50 million. There was no financial incentive to deliver anything, and, perhaps consequently, it has not.

The only thing that reassures me at the moment is that the Government are going to look smartly at whether to discriminate between the radio system and data production. The big problem is that, nowhere in the world, at pace and at scale, has anyone shifted a radio system on to a telecommunication system. That is the fundamental problem. The transmission of data is not the issue—we do that on our phones all the time—but we probably need to carry on delivering the radio as it was and separate the data off. If we continue to try to combine them, I worry that it will become even more undeliverable than it has been to date.

Lord Sharpe of Epsom >
(Con)

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The noble Lord makes a good point and I thank him for his perspective. He is right that the radio supply over the networks remains critical. As I understand it—and this answers one of the earlier questions from the noble Lord, Lord Harris—the technology is more proven than it was when the PAC last commented on it. It is being rolled out in other parts of the world; from memory, Korea is one of the countries where it is being tested. So some of those aspects at least have been dealt with.

Lord Harris of Haringey >
(Lab)

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My Lords, I apologise for coming back again, but the Minister is essentially implying that this just happened—that Motorola came in and bought Airwave, and these things just happened like that. But is not the reality that the negotiations were conducted between highly sophisticated multinational companies that are used to doing negotiations and a bunch of ingénues on the Home Office side? It is not surprising that the country has been ripped off in this way. Does the Minister agree?

Lord Sharpe of Epsom >
(Con)

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No, that is a very unfair characterisation. As I said earlier, Motorola bought Airwave, which could not have been foreseen, and, therefore, as the noble Lord, Lord Hogan-Howe, has just pointed out, it became in effect a monopoly supplier. That is why the Competition and Markets Authority was involved at the behest of the Home Office, which did the right thing.