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This circular is	Relevant to the National Framework		
Status	This circular provides information on the e-fire project's current status and its relationship to Best Value Performance Indicator 157.		

'e-fire' project: progress update and relationship with BVPI 157

Issued by:

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Addressed to:

**Chief Executives of County Councils in England
Clerks and Chairs of Fire and Rescue Authorities
The Commissioner for the London Fire and
Emergency Planning Authority
The Chief Fire Officer**

Summary

The prime contract for the development of the e-fire project has been let to Parity Solutions Ltd by Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority, which is acting as the project's Lead Authority. This circular provides an update on the project's progress; information to assist FRAs in their planning; and clarification of expectations of FRAs in respect of Best Value Performance Indicator 157.

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1 Project Purpose and Deliverables

- 1.1 e-fire is a national ‘electronic government’ project which forms part of a programme of national projects, funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The project will produce a range of internet-based facilities, each of which is designed to provide a key component for fire and rescue authorities to use in their delivery of electronic services.
- 1.2 The contracts for e-fire are being let by Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority which is acting as the Lead Authority. The project is being progressed by an ODPM-based project team led by the Senior Responsible Owner.
- 1.3 The suite of products delivered by the e-fire ‘portal’ will provide a range of services to members of the public and those responsible for commercial premises. Users will be able to assess fire risk, plan control measures, prepare escape plans, apply for petroleum licences and register explosives on line. Users will also be able to request services from their local Fire and Rescue Service, such as a home fire risk assessment.
- 1.4 The portal will also carry home fire safety advice specifically targeted at carers, social services professionals and housing departments, to enable the provision of safety guidance to high-risk, hard-to-reach households and to support local fire and rescue service work in the development of productive cross-agency partnerships. Further elements of the system will provide information and resources for use by school teachers in support of fire safety education programmes.
- 1.5 A ‘careers’ section will provide information and self-assessment materials for key uniformed roles within the Service such as Firefighter and Control Operator, as well as an overview of career opportunities within support services functions.
- 1.6 e-Fire will enable the provision, acquisition and exchange of information in new or more efficient ways, provide transactional services via the internet and prepare the ground for fire and rescue services to introduce other channels of access such as digital television.

2 Current Status

- 2.1 In May, the Prime Contract for the delivery of the portal and primary systems was awarded to Parity Solutions Ltd, following a tendering exercise under the S-Cat procurement framework.
- 2.2 Along with its sub contractors, Parity is consulting with the central project team and four separate panels of ‘subject matter experts’ from the Fire and Rescue Service community to establish detailed user requirements for the content, structure and functioning of the portal and systems. To date, excellent progress has been made on this phase.
- 2.3 Through their usage of the system, members of the public and premises operators will be able to generate requests for the delivery of a range of services by their local Fire and Rescue Service. Authorities will appreciate the need to ensure that they are able to receive and act appropriately upon these service requests once the system enters ‘live’ running early in 2006. There will be a number of action areas for each Fire and Rescue Service in preparation for this phase and it will be important to ensure that the preparatory work is initiated well in advance of the scheduled implementation date.

3 Integration with Fire and Rescue Services’ Local Systems and Processes

- 3.1 The design of the system’s technical architecture has been supported by consultancy from leading experts in integrated portal systems and informed by the analysis of a recent, detailed

technical survey conducted amongst fire and rescue services. Having established the architecture, the project team has been working with the contractors to define the means by which the records generated by public users can be transferred into the information systems used by local fire and rescue services. The current plan is for this 'interface' to be achievable at three discrete levels of sophistication, reflecting the diversity of existing Fire and Rescue Service infrastructures and affording a degree of local choice over the manner in which the system is implemented. Each integration level will be proven via pilot testing in a selected Fire and Rescue Service prior to full implementation.

- 3.2 The technical architecture, interface approach and potential 'business' implications for the fire and rescue services were highlighted through presentations to the recent Fire IS/IT Managers' annual conference at Moreton in Marsh. The project team plan to follow up this event (and the subsequent dialogue with suppliers of information systems to the Fire and Rescue Service) with a series of regional workshops which are planned to take place in August 2005.
- 3.3 The workshops will focus upon the technical and operational issues that will arise during implementation of the system. They will be designed to give colleagues the greatest possible window of opportunity within which to plan and prepare. Key target audiences for the workshops will include Information Technology staff, along with practitioners and planners in the Community Fire Safety, Business Fire Safety and Recruitment areas. Full information on locations and agendas will be provided under separate cover.
- 3.4 A key principle in the development of e-fire has been that the systems and facilities provided to 'public' users should be free at the point of delivery. The project team have also sought to minimise the cost of takeup from the perspective of fire and rescue services, centralising wherever possible the cost of equipment and licences, and providing central services to assist in the development of interfaces with local technical environments.
- 3.5 The 'pilot' testing referred to in 3.1 above will involve the development of an open interface for the transfer of portal records into Fire and Rescue Service 'back end' systems. The cost of developing the 'portal' side of the interface is included within the scope of the project and we have advised industry that we will publish the e-fire interface standards at no charge. It is likely that suppliers will seek to charge fire and rescue services for the development of their side of the interface with 'back end' systems. However the project team will seek to ensure that the cost of developing the interface specification is shared across all users of each system rather than being charged individually to each Fire and Rescue Service.

4 Timetable

- 4.1 The analysis phase of the project is now well underway. Following completion and sign-off of the detailed specifications, the 'build' activity will commence and will run through the rest of the calendar year. An extensive programme of testing and pilot activity will be initiated towards the end of this period and a phased rollout programme to local fire and rescue services is planned for the first quarter of 2006.
- 4.2 In common with the other elements of the 'e-Government' initiative, the deadline for implementation of e-fire was set for 31st March 2006 and a demanding – though achievable – project schedule was drawn up to enable live running by this date. However, the requirement to suspend the letting of the contract until after the cessation of election purdah has had to be reflected in the planned 'go live' date, which now stands at 19th April 2006.
- 4.3 The central project team and supplier consortium aims to establish and maintain active dialogue with colleagues across the fire community throughout the development, rollout, launch and initial support of the system. We welcome the close engagement of colleagues and plan,

through work on the project, to establish a number of ‘communities of practice’ to identify and promulgate best practice and to facilitate the ongoing development of the system.

5 Relationship with Best Value Performance Indicator 157

- 5.1 In common with other elements of Local Government, the fire and rescue authorities have been set a target for the delivery of electronic government facilities to the public by the end of the Financial Year 2005/6. Progress towards this target is measured by BVPI 157 which assesses the number of services delivered electronically as a proportion of those which are legally permissible for delivery through such a route.
- 5.2 Currently, fire and rescue authorities are required to ensure that 100% of services legally permissible for electronic delivery are available via such a route by the end of the current financial year; a target which is reflected within the current Framework Document and hence the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. This position differs from that facing other elements of Local Government, where ‘priority services’ have been defined which focus authorities’ current-year delivery on the achievement of key, specified targets across a range of service types.
- 5.3 Given the unique combination of change factors faced by fire and rescue authorities in the current environment, ODPM recognises the difficulty which many are likely to experience in achieving the ‘100%’ target by the end of the current financial year. We also recognise that a number of national fire service projects currently in hand will deliver ‘e-services’ to citizens, albeit outside the original target timescales for the delivery of e-government.
- 5.4 In view of these factors, ODPM have decided to focus current-year objectives for Fire and Rescue Service e-Government upon the establishment and national take-up of the outcomes of the e-fire project. Authorities will be required to ensure that they are able to receive and appropriately act upon requests for service raised via the national portal and to ensure that the portal is updated to reflect the completion of each request. Authorities meeting this target will be deemed to have fulfilled their responsibilities for BVPI 157 within the financial year 2005-6.
- 5.5 Work contributing towards achievement of the ‘100%’ e-services target will continue across a range of other projects and further guidance on expectations for the achievement of this target will be provided in due course.

6 Further Information

- 6.1 Further information on e-fire can be found on the project’s dedicated website which can be found at: www.e-fire.gov.uk.
- 6.2 Queries can be submitted via the website using electronic mail. Alternatively, colleagues are invited to contact me directly via e-mail at: dave.lawrence@odpm.gsi.gov.uk or by telephone on (020) 7944 2925.

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