



The *BAPCO Journal* speaks to ESN programme director John Black and senior responsible owner Simon Parr about what the recently announced updates mean for the emergency services

ESN: getting ready for delivery



What can you tell us about the new ESN mobile and user services contracts?

John Black: The core of the delivery of ESN is through these two contracts. Mobile Services provides the network coverage and masts, and User Services provides the core of the data service and the push-to-talk solution.

The Mobile Services contract is held by BT/EE, and this new contract allows them to continue their work to deliver that part of the solution.

The recently announced User Services contract was awarded to IBM following a two-year open procurement process. They will deliver the mission-critical communications [MCX] app, and other parts of the core solution with their partners. With both contracts now awarded, we can really focus on delivery this year.

What does this mean for emergency services critical communications?

JB: Now that we have these suppliers confirmed, we're working to confirm our plans to deliver the core functions we promised, which is the critical voice capability that will enable us to move users across from Airwave, and a new data carrier service.

The data service will be a critical-comms-enabled data pipe, with high reliability and a high bandwidth. This is for data applications that will roll out over the coming years and will be critical for our emergency services.

Simon Parr: We're talking about something that blue-light services have never had before, a solution that becomes future-proofed.

This is not just about a replacement. What ESN will do is evolve as technology evolves, allowing blue-light partners to take advantage of advances in technologies over the next 20 or 30 years.

For example, this could allow robotics and AI to get involved in longer-term issues around deployments and assistance at the scenes of incidents.

What does this mean for ESN delivery, and the progress being made?

JB: Even throughout the procurement process, we've always been progressing the work to build out the network, including adding coverage in the London Underground and remote rural areas. We can now talk to users about the core part of the solution and we're looking to move forward at pace.

We're also talking concurrently about plans and dates for delivery, and working collaboratively with users to ensure we are all aligned at the right time. Then we can smoothly on-board organisations and integrate systems – like control rooms – as we focus on the critical path to delivery.

SP: Signing these two contracts is the largest piece in the jigsaw, clearly demonstrating that 'this is now real' for users. Having the programme in delivery means that we can now start talking in practical detail about exactly what's going to happen and when.

We want users to get used to this new solution. To understand it, familiarise themselves with it, assure it and find out exactly what they're going to need to do to accept it.

Then we start to move ESN forward into control rooms, training departments, vehicle fit-outs and so on. Up to the point where we know we can bring this new generation of communication tools into the hands of the users and turn Airwave off.

What can the emergency services organisations expect to see now that these suppliers have joined the ESN programme?

JB: First of all, we acknowledge that it has been incredibly frustrating during the past couple of years that we've been in the procurement cycle.

We're past that point now, which means we can tell users the





contents of the solution, which will be developed and pulled together by IBM and their partners. We'll be delivering insight sessions at BAPCO as well as other engagement opportunities.

These sessions will describe elements of the solution in more detail, which are tried and tested, such as the Samsung MCX application, which is already in production, serving over 200,000 users in South Korea.

The question that's on all our users' minds is what are the new dates? That's the next key piece of the jigsaw – when we can share our key milestones leading up to the full voice solution.

At the moment we're expecting that to be delivered in 2027, but we've still got work to do to confirm our detailed plan and dates.

SP: ESN users are going to see different things at different points. We have our Senior User representatives who understand, with their teams, how the solution is put together.

You'll have senior leaders understanding strategically where this fits into their programme over the next few years. But what we're really looking forward to are the frontline paramedics, firefighters, police officers and others who will get their hands on – at a small scale to start with – demonstration devices.

Getting these users to have a look and familiarise themselves with how they're going to work in the future, and have them test and talk to us about the solution. We plan to do that over the next year or so while the solution is being built and things are being developed,

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so that when it's delivered, people have got a familiarisation with it.

What can emergency services organisations do to prepare and get involved in the transition to ESN?

JB: Be patient for a little longer. As soon as we can give more certainty on the dates we're targeting for delivery, we'll share them – and users can get on planning with us when different organisations want to on-board.



Air to Ground is a key ESN element

This will give us the best chance of getting all the different user organisations on board effectively. The patience shown by the emergency services in the last couple of years has been fantastic. Thank you for that. In the next few months, we can engage again and start planning in earnest.

SP: Listen and feed back to the representatives you've got in the programme. Every organisation has a route in to understand what's going on.

There are practical and technical things to do, as well as getting information through to staff and colleagues. Start to engage now, to develop your understanding and knowledge, so you can start to plan.

When your representatives come and say 'right, you've got to do this or that to get ready for ESN', you say 'yes, we knew this was coming, we understand it and we're prepared'.

What keeps the Emergency Services Network programme moving forward?

JB: We're both incredibly proud of the work that the team has done to get the new contracts in place. Government procurement is never straightforward and there are multiple layers of governance to go through, but we've got there.

What is really important for our team is to keep focused on what our real goal is. We created a simple phrase: 'Our job is to deliver ESN, so that we can transition our users and close Airwave down safely.'

It's about enabling us to make that first step of transitioning the users so that we get the platform live, then we can develop it over many years. But we're laser-focused on getting that first step of transition done because it's absolutely critical. We also remind ourselves constantly that the most important word in that phrase is 'safely'.

As a programme team we absolutely recognise that this is critical communications and lives depend on it. Whatever else we do to make it as efficient as possible, that's an absolute red line – that focus on the safety of our users is of overriding importance.

SP: The thing that I want to pay tribute to is the relentless dedication and skill of everyone in the programme. The determination to take what was an incredibly complex piece of work with different contracts and different processes, through a governance process,

with a new business case, and even a new government.

[That includes] levels of oversight – up to and including chief secretary to the Treasury – and nobody blinked. At no point did anybody say this isn't worth it.

I think I speak for so many when I say that everybody knows this is the right thing to do. The level of commitment from hundreds of people – not just inside the programme, but outside in the user community – has been absolutely remarkable.

What are you most looking forward to as the programme moves to delivering ESN?

JB: Actually, it's delivering ESN and that's why I joined the programme. It's one of the biggest and most exciting technology programmes in the country, and the chance for me and the team to deliver it is what drives, motivates and excites us.

Getting back to that point – when we can actually talk about creating and building things, and more importantly, putting solutions into the hands of users – is fantastic. It's what we're all here for.

SP: To finally be in a position where I'm confident this not only can but will be delivered is really exciting. This is something that I'm going to see through with John and the team, and we've worked incredibly hard to get us ready to this point.

For the next year, to actually start hitting milestones where people say 'that's finished, it works', and on to the next one on the journey to transition user organisations... that's what I'm most looking forward to. 🙌